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THE WONDROUS WIFE

CHARLES MARRIOTT

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THE WONDROUS WIFE

THE WONDROUS WIFE

By

CHARLES MARRIOTT

Author of

The Catfish, Now, The Dewpond
Etc., Etc.

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THE WONDROUS WIFE

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THE WONDROUS WIFE

CHAPTER I

WHEN, after five years of marriage, Margaret Lisle was compelled by the well-intentioned activity of her friends to take notice of her husband's unfaithfulness, she at once left him. She explained her reasons for doing so in a letter which he said in his reply proved her to be the hard cold woman who had driven him to other consolation.

"If you had been untrue to me because you were madly in love with another woman," she wrote, "I believe I could have forgiven you. How do I know you were not? Because, although you foolishly tried to conceal your intrigue from me, you told half a dozen of your friends. Apparently you took quite unnecessary pains that they should know. Why? Because, for you, the real charm of the episode—which, if it had not been forced upon my notice, would have remained an episode—depended on its being known and talked about. I might forgive a wound to my affection, or even to my pride, but I can not continue to live with a man who insults my intelligence."

Her conviction that, but for her discovery, her husband's association with Laura Dacre would have been merely an episode was not weakened by his emphatic assertion that he intended to live his own life. She did not lay claim to an extraordinary knowledge of human nature, but she was quite sure that a man only finds it necessary to say that he means to live his own life when he is about to live somebody else's. She refused her husband's offer of an allowance, and as her own private income was too small to support her in decency, went to live with her only brother, a Bristol solicitor, who was fourteen years older than herself.

Theoretically, Charles Dixon disapproved of the step she took. He willingly offered her a home, but expressed an opinion that agreed with a remark of Doctor Johnson's upon wives who left their husbands for reasons similar to hers. With this in her mind, Margaret mystified him by saying, "Yes, but Laura Dacre is not a housemaid." In reality he was afraid to admit, even to himself, how glad he was that his sister could not live with her husband. The Dixons were the most affectionate couple in the world, but at the end of their honeymoon he had made the appalling discovery that they had nothing between them to talk about. When Margaret came

to live with them he gave a sigh of relief, and with a clear conscience left the two ladies to entertain each other in the evenings, while he read himself to sleep over *The Times and Mirror.*

Margaret had intended to make only a temporary home with the Dixons, and when she had been with them a week she realized the enormous sacrifice she had made in leaving her husband. Austin Lisle was a successful poet and dramatist, and his house was a center for some of the most interesting people in London. Until she lost it Margaret did not know how dependent she was on society. Living in her native village, which she had only visited at intervals since childhood, was like breathing an air deficient in oxygen. Nobody understood her. At allusions to life or literature which she thought commonplace, they simply stared. There was a certain poetic justice in this, because in London she had been considered conventional and old-fashioned in her ideas. She was too practical, however, to waste time in vain regrets, and immediately turned to considering how she could earn enough money to set up a home for herself in more congenial surroundings. At the time of her marriage she had been an art student, but she recognized now that she had not enough original talent to make her a

successful painter. Her general education was good —she had been at Cheltenham College—but she had not the moral qualities necessary for any kind of teaching that would imply a position of dependence. So she narrowed down the field of possible occupations to that of handicrafts, and finally decided that she would take up decorative leather work.

The Dixons lived about seven miles from Bristol, in a large, stucco-faced, eighteenth-century house standing in a roughly triangular space, surrounded by a high wall, where two roads divided. An iron gate in the apex of the triangle gave upon an oval carriage drive. In summer, the pale yellow front of the house, with a stucco urn at each end of the parapet, was almost hidden by lilacs and laburnums. A large Portugal laurel grew in the middle of the oval space islanded by the drive. At the back of the house were stables, a large kitchen garden and a meadow, containing a tennis-court, surrounded by poplars. In this meadow there was a two-storied barn in which, soon after his marriage, Charles Dixon had fitted up a dark-room for photography, but now seldom used; and the rest of the upper floor made an excellent workshop for Margaret.

At first the Dixons were grieved at the idea of

her working for money, but when she proved to them that certain shops in Bond Street were kept by women who were undoubtedly in society, they became reconciled, particularly since they learned that she did not mean to open a little shop in the village. She made an arrangement with an art emporium in Clifton to take all her wares, which consisted of satchels, purses, blotters, cigarette-cases, tobacco-pouches and ladies' belts, and charge a commission on the sales. As so often happens, a thing begun with one purpose changed to something else. By the time Margaret had mastered her craft she had got over her first boredom, and begun to take an interest in her surroundings. Perhaps her own experience had given her an exaggerated notion of the importance of happiness, and the thing that struck her as most painful in the life under her immediate observation was the way bright and pretty village girls changed with marriage into draggled and depressed women. If they did not marry they generally took in slop-work from the Bristol tailors. This was very dull and poorly paid work, done under unhealthy conditions, and a surprising number of the young women were consumptive or, as they said, "in a decline." As soon, then, as Margaret felt herself competent to teach

her craft, she took three or four of the village girls into her workshop. She selected them according to some system of her own, and against the general advice of her neighbors. But, as she said:

"The thing that really matters to me is that I shall like my companions."

She had difficuties, of course. Some of the girls turned out sulky, others lazy. This one was quarrelsome, that one incorrigibly dirty in her personal habits. Finally she had three assistants after her own heart. One of them, to the grief of the Dixons, had had an illegitimate child, and another was consumptive. Margaret managed the enterprise on severely businesslike principles, and paid the girls reasonable wages. Every week-day morning except Saturday, and some afternoons, she spent in the workshop. Sometimes she played to the girls —she broke into her capital to buy a piano of her own—and sometimes she read to them. Commercially the business was at least self-supporting, and its complete success as a social experiment encouraged Margaret to think of extending its character. She studied embroidery for church purposes, and already began to consider the practicability of doing away with the middleman and opening a shop in Clifton under the control of a paid manageress.

Margaret was now twenty-nine. She was a tall, bigly-made young woman, with reddish hair and gray-green eyes. Her face, at a first glance rather impassive in its expression, indicated repressed impatience. She moved quickly and held herself upright. Her manner was extremely serious, and she would make the most comical remarks without a smile. When she did smile, however, the tears often came into her eyes, as if she could not let herself go in one direction without breaking down in another. Her voice was deep in pitch and rather unsteady, so that strangers hearing her speak instinctively looked around to learn the cause of her agitation. The girls were never tired of looking at her long white hands. They loved her with the jealous passion that young women often bear for a person of their own sex. In her presence they were a little shy. They knew that she had been married, but they only guessed at her history and never spoke of it among themselves. Probably they thought that she had been deserted. They always spoke of her as "Miss Margaret," though she was, of course, generally known in the village as Mrs. Lisle. It was as if they preferred to forget that she had a husband. Quite unconsciously Margaret had become the center of one of those curious

little man-hating, or at least man-scorning, associations composed of women who individually—as had been proved in the case of one of them—were neither by instinct nor training hostile to man.

All this time Margaret was frequently hearing of her husband. She avoided asking herself whether she still cared for him as a man by openly admiring him as a writer. She bought his books and jealously watched the fluctuations of his popularity. A certain critic pursued him with merciless humor. Margaret was afraid that some of the things that he said were true, but she felt that she could have killed him for saying them in print. The Dixons never mentioned Lisle, and Margaret was amused at their efforts to distract her attention from newspaper references to his works. They also tried to console her by abusing the stage. Evidently they thought that Laura Dacre was a designing woman. Margaret had never seen Laura Dacre off the stage, and she persuaded herself that she felt no curiosity about her. She only wondered how so clever an actress could be such an undiscerning fool in private life.

The village of Compton consisted chiefly of one long street, which began within two hundred yards of the Dixons' gate. There were a few general

shops, one of them also a post-office, and two inns. Every morning at ten o'clock a heavy two-horsed omnibus started from the larger inn, and picking up the mail, drove into Bristol, returning in the evening. Two other omnibuses from more remote villages also passed daily through Compton, so that communication with the city was regular and convenient.

Compton stood upon high ground sloping gently to the north and south into broad valleys watered by two brown, slow-moving, wide-curving streams that united about a mile and a half beyond the village, and finally joined the Avon at Bristol. These brooks, mild and willow-fringed for the greater part of their courses, here and there achieved a character of the picturesque by tumbling over a weir or flowing darkly through a rocky chasm clothed with a hanging wood of oak, chestnut and hazel. By their habit of swelling out of all bounds in winter they had forced man to the necessity of building, at every point where they were crossed by a road, one of those beautiful many-arched and strongly buttressed stone bridges the construction of which appears to be a forgotten art. Away from the immediate neighborhood of water, the general character of the country was that of rolling green

pasture and red arable, divided by gray stone walls, dotted with immense elms and crossed by broad white roads of Roman origin. Farming was, of course, the chief industry of the neighborhood, but the presence of a good building stone accounted for several quarries which gave a still wilder aspect to the more picturesque portions of the watercourses. The effect of these quarries on the landscape was repeated upon the character of the men who worked in them; and, as there was also a coal-field at no great distance, the natives of Compton were of a slightly harder type, less bucolic though not less rude, than is usual in an agricultural district.

Compton church lay in a hollow about half a mile to the north of the village. It was a gray building of Norman foundation, with tower and spire and a full peal of bells, and contained several interesting tombs and brasses. Outside the churchyard gate there was an immense elm with a hollow trunk, walled round. Nobody knew how old it was, but there was a legend of a headless horseman connected with it. Margaret did not go to her parish church. When she was asked why she did not accompany her brother and his wife, she said that it was because she could not bear Anglican chants. About a mile from the Dixons', on the way to Bris-

tol, there was another church, that of Little Compton, quite a small building of the local pennant stone, with a red-tiled roof and belfry, which looked as if it had been the holiday task of an architect of genius. It stood on the brow of a green hill overlooking the junction of the two streams and the wooded and gently undulating country between Compton and Bristol; and not only its general proportion, but every line of mortar in the random coursing of its walls, and the yews and ilexes by which it was relieved, were apparently parts of a carefully considered decorative design. Here the service was "high," or, as the vicar of Little Compton preferred to say, "fully Catholic." There was a celebration of the holy communion every morning, and Margaret seldom failed to attend it, though frequently she was the only person present besides the priest and the server. In church work such as district visiting, Sunday-school teaching and parochial entertainments she took no part whatever.

The Dixons occupied a position which cut them off from most of the local society that Margaret might have found congenial. Charles Dixon's father and grandfather had been in business, and consequently he was not on visiting terms with the county families, including that of a duke living in

the neighborhood. In politics he was a Conservative and at meetings of the Primrose League, of which body he was local secretary, the duke always made a point of speaking a few words to him, which he carefully repeated to his wife. The Dixons were not really too proud to associate with the farmers who were their principal neighbors, but the idea of doing so never occurred to them as a possibility. Their only friends were the rector of Compton, the vicar of Little Compton, the doctor and a retired military officer and their families. With them they exchanged periodical and slightly formal hospitality. In the summer they played tennis, in the winter bridge. So far from being bored by their comparative isolation, the Dixons were gently proud of it. They stood for the backbone of England, the middle classes. They did not recognize that the whole scheme of society was different now from that their fathers knew. The grandsons of some of the men who touched their hats to Charles Dixon were not only more prosperous but more cultivated and better informed than himself.

Every week-day morning at nine o'clock Charles Dixon drove to his office in Bristol, returning in time for dinner at seven. One summer evening he

came home in a state of agitation; a scheme which had been in the air for several years, but never quite believed in, had suddenly matured. The Great Western Railway Company had decided to make a shortened route to South Wales, avoiding Bristol and passing through Compton. There was to be a station within a quarter of a mile of the Dixons' house. Mrs. Dixon was terribly distressed. The country, which she seldom looked at, would be ruined, and a lot of nasty Bristol shopkeepers—she was a clergyman's daughter—would build villas at their very doors. For once Charles did not go to sleep after dinner, but got out an ordnance map and traced the course of the line in red ink, while his wife leaned on his shoulder nearly crying. All that evening they were unusually affectionate, as if drawn together by some calamity. Margaret thought the railway would be a horrid nuisance, but she did not see why her brother need make all that fuss about it. The idea which occurred to her, that it was likely to bring him profitable business in connection with the sale of land, did not seem to console him. Evidently for him the hardest blow of all was the fact that the profanation had only been made possible by the acquiescence—"treachery" he called it—of the duke.

Almost immediately the scheme was put in progress, and an army of rude navvies invaded Compton and the surrounding villages. Tin huts arose as if by magic on the green hill above Little Compton church, which trembled to the shock of blasting. There was to be a cutting right through the hill, and a viaduct spanning the valley on either side. By the beginning of autumn a temporary line of rails had been laid down, and little locomotives ran to and fro drawing trucks of red earth to the "tip" at the growing end of the embankment.

Not less striking than this effect upon the material surface were the social and industrial changes among the inhabitants. There was first of all a sudden development of agriculture. Land that had been marking time as pasture was plowed up and planted with small fruit and vegetables. The stone-quarries, which of late years had been worked only in a desultory fashion, took on a new activity. Speculative builders bought land and began to plant villas, with slate roofs and freestone-faced bay windows, along the lanes. One after another certain old and large estates that had been long untenanted were taken by prosperous Bristol tradespeople, and motor-cars became quite a common feature in Compton. The village grocer stocked petrol,

and the blacksmith hung out a sign, "Motor repairs done here." The general shop became a store, and put forth a new front, and young ladies in black dresses appeared behind the counter of the drapery department.

One by one the Dixons' friends betrayed their order. First the vicar of Little Compton, then the rector of Compton, and then the doctor's wife called on the new tenants of Compton Lodge and The Grange. When Mrs. Bland—the major's wife—did the same, Charles Dixon said that he supposed they had better put their pride in their pockets. Their calling could not now be mistaken for professional keenness, and if they held back they would not only make themselves ridiculous, but would seem to be setting themselves up above their betters, since the services came before the law. Mrs. Dixon held out for a week, and finally asked the rector's wife to accompany her. That made her call seem less personal, and she tactfully allowed it to be understood that she and her husband were not given to entertaining or being entertained.

Margaret thought it all very silly, but as she was not in her own house she made no protest. Her sentimental instincts were against the violation of

the countryside by the railway, but she was too young and too practical to sit down and mourn over the inevitable. She made the acquaintance of the newcomers in Compton, and found them not alarming—some of them, indeed, were interesting. Now that she had got used to her ambiguous position and was happily employed, her old craving for human society came back to her. She regretted the stupid pride that made her brother and his wife keep their new acquaintances at a distance. If she had merely consulted her own selfish wishes she would have left her brother's house and taken rooms in the village. She could afford to do that now. But during the last two years she had learned that one can not live one's life alone, and the Dixons, without knowing it, had become curiously dependent upon her.

CHAPTER II

AMONG Margaret's more intimate friends were the Reverend Percy Wakeling, the vicar of Little Compton, and his wife. Entering the vicarage as she was wont to do, without knocking or ringing, at about nine o'clock on an October evening, Margaret interrupted an argument about the railway between Mr. Wakeling and a strange man. He was introduced to her as Mr. Fawcett, the new engineer in charge of that section of the line. He was a sturdily built young man of about thirty, with a good head, clear and penetrating gray eyes, a boldly cut jaw and chin, and a dark mustache. He was dressed in an old gray coat, riding breeches and gaiters.

Margaret wished that she had not come upon him so suddenly. Her entrance had evidently put him out in something he was saying, and for some moments after they had sat down there was an awkward silence, while he looked at her with extraordinary interest. It was as if, she thought, they had met and quarreled upon an earlier occasion,

though she was quite certain that she had never seen him before.

Wakeling, who was a graceful white-faced man, with a very long chin and merry brown eyes, explained to Margaret what they had been talking about. He and his wife had attacked the railway on esthetic grounds, and Fawcett had retorted that it was foolish to object to anything that made for human comfort and convenience.

"Well, it is only to gain half an hour or so for passengers to South Wales, isn't it?" said Margaret.

"Oh, use your imagination a bit," said Fawcett disgustedly. "Don't you see that it brings Ireland nearer, and eventually America?"

"But is that necessarily a good thing?" she asked him.

"It depends on how you look at it," he said, with a laugh. Evidently he was not very keen to continue the argument now, but not, as Margaret saw, because he doubted his own position. Possibly because she was half inclined to agree with him, she said:

"Well, it's made a big change here."

"And it will make a bigger," he calmly assured her.

"Nor for the better."

"That's a matter of opinion. It will bring money to the place—and that means most things that are worth having."

"Beauty, for example?"

He looked at her gravely for a moment, and then said in a quiet voice:

"What is beauty?"

Margaret saw that he was not merely playing with words, and she tried to think of a definition to answer his question, but before she could speak, Mrs. Wakeling, who was a thin, square-jawed, pretty woman, with dark blue eyes, a mop of tawny hair and a green Liberty gown, leaned forward with her hands between her knees, and said with an ironical drawl:

"Your navvies, for example; are they beautiful?"

Fawcett laughed, though he colored slightly, as if he were vexed by the interruption, and said:

"Of course they are rough. You can't expect navvies to spend their leisure in picking buttercups and daisies. They have large bodies and vigorous though limited minds. They probably drink a great deal more beer than is good for them or their pockets, but they are generally respectful to women, unless the women themselves invite a different treat-

ment. Their language is coarse, but a good deal less offensive to me than much that I have heard in quite respectable clubs."

"But you haven't answered my question," said Mrs. Wakeling, gently patting her hands together.

Fawcett laughed again, and glanced at Margaret. Evidently he did not care to explain his ideas about the beautiful to Mrs. Wakeling.

"At least they are alive," he said good-humoredly.

Mrs. Wakeling looked at her husband for congratulations upon her apparent victory, and then, turning to Margaret, said surprisedly:

"Aren't you going to take your things off, Margarita?"

This misuse of her name was one of the few mannerisms that Margaret disliked in the vicar's wife. A vague feeling of unprotectedness under Fawcett's attentive regard had made her, contrary to her usual custom, keep on her hat and jacket. She now rose, and with Mr. Wakeling's help rather awkwardly removed them, appearing in a slightly low-necked gown of lavender crêpe-de-chine. Her color was a little heightened as she sat down again, feeling, though she did not know why, that she ought not to have stayed.

As if to make up for the attack on their appearance, Mr. Wakeling began to talk sympathetically about the navvies' behavior. He had a gentle rather nasal voice, and a trick of looking at his fingers while speaking.

"The thing that impresses me most of all," said Fawcett, "is the extraordinary loyalty of these rough men to their job. They are not particularly honest in other ways, but they seldom scamp a piece of work."

"They seem to take it very easily," said the vicar.

"The good workman always does. I've seen a man stop when you would have thought another stroke would have done it, and take a drink out of his can. The amateur would have given the other stroke in a hurry and spoilt the job."

The two men went on to talk about a plan they were sharing for the entertainment of the navvies in the coming winter evenings. That, indeed, appeared to be the reason for Fawcett's visit. Mrs. Wakeling was too much occupied with the manipulation of her cigarette to talk, and so Margaret had a good opportunity to study the young engineer. He was the first example she had met of a quite common and increasing class of men, to be found in battle-ships and mines and factories, and, with

a slight difference, in hospitals: highly trained and self-reliant men, who apply to the crude problems of daily life and industry the kind of knowledge that Margaret vaguely thought of as "scientific," who take into the open air the methods of the laboratory and the study.

The novelty of the type made her perhaps exaggerate its real importance; for the moment she had a superstitious regard for the man who "did things" in a material sense. The intellectual people she had been accustomed to meet in London were not checked by any practical standard; the man of letters, the painter—or even the priest, like Mr. Wakeling—might do slack work, and though before God they were guilty, they were not subject to the immediate retribution that would fall upon the man who passed a faulty girder.

The engineer took on a deeper significance to her imagination by contrast with his present surroundings. Mrs. Wakeling's drawing-room, with its Liberty curtains and light walls hung with autotype reproductions of the pictures of G. F. Watts and Rossetti, and of the statues of Rodin, represented a taste that was just too self-consciously refined, and consequently gave the effect of artificiality. Mr. Wakeling, too, with his slender black figure, deli-

cate hands and comparatively high-pitched voice, though he was by no means an effeminate person, seemed hardly a man beside Fawcett.

"When did you come here?" said Mrs. Wakeling interestedly, at a break in the conversation between the two men.

"Last Thursday. I have been here a week to-morrow," said Fawcett.

"Why, you talk about your beloved navvies as if you had known them all your life."

Fawcett laughed apologetically.

"Well," he said, "one can't afford to waste time in preliminaries in a trade like mine. The sooner you get to know what your men are made of, the better for the job."

"And how long do you think you'll be here?"

"Six or eight months, probably," said Fawcett. And in his further explanation the fact came out that his selection to fill the place of the engineer first appointed, whose health had broken down, was a rather unusually high compliment to a man of his years.

"It will mean a great deal to me if everything goes on all right," he said modestly.

"Where are you living?" persisted Mrs. Wakeling.

"I've taken rooms with a Mrs. Andrews—at the corner of the church lane."

"I know. You have a jolly view over the valley."

"Yes; I can see the embankment from my bedroom window."

"Oh, if you call that beautiful!"

"From my point of view. Besides, it very quickly becomes part of the landscape. Have you noticed, too," he went on more reflectively, "that railway work sometimes gives a new character to a place by making it, if anything, more countrified than it was before? It gives things a chance to grow that would otherwise get rooted up. I once saw a cutting somewhere in Surrey that was all ablow with canterbury-bells in three colors. In the sunshine they were a wonderful sight. Somebody, I suppose, had once flung out a handful of seeds, and the plants had gone on reproducing themselves. Every year the wind had spread their seed a little wider, until both sides of the cutting for several hundred yards were covered with these beautiful flowers. In any other place, waste or cultivated, they would not have had the same undisturbed conditions. It was that railway that made them possible."

It so happened that Margaret had seen the place and remembered it vividly, but she did not say so.

Fawcett's unexpected sensitiveness to so delicate a form of beauty gave a new interest to his character, but it was an interest she preferred to think over in private. She rather hoped that the Wakelings did not think it remarkable in him that he should love and remember flowers; she wanted them to think of him as the engineer, the professional enemy to all forms of beauty.

Mrs. Wakeling asked her to play. She went to the piano, and after a moment's hesitation, opened a volume of Beethoven's sonatas, and began the Sonata in D minor (Opus thirty-one, Number two). Through the quiet statement of the opening phrase she heard Fawcett settle himself in his chair behind her. The broken chords for the left hand, rising through key after key in the first movement of this sonata, give to it a menacing character. They are like the undeviating approach of heavy footsteps. There is a conflict, interrupted by a pleading and almost articulate recitative, and the movement ends in calm but melancholy acquiescence. Margaret played well. She had the right understanding of Beethoven's music as abstract music, independent almost of the particular instrument for which it was written, and she gave to the second movement, with its beat of

muffled drums and snatches of divine melody, an almost orchestral coloring. When she had finished the sonata the Wakelings murmured "Thank you," but Fawcett said nothing at all. To Mrs. Wakeling's question whether he was fond of music he merely answered "Yes," but the tone in which he said it persuaded Margaret that she might play what she liked without fear of boring him. She divided her musical friends into Beethoven and Chopin people. Fawcett, she decided, was a Beethoven man. But she did not care to tackle another sonata now, so she played a short piece of Schumann's that she knew by heart.

When she rose from the piano, Margaret felt rather stiff and shy. She wished that she had gone on playing or had not played at all. The music had only served to bring back the vague feeling of apprehension which she had on entering the room. Impatiently she fought against the mood, and forced herself to take part in the conversation.

"I can only express it by saying that I like brown music best," said Fawcett laughingly, in reply to some remark of the vicar's. Margaret understood him perfectly, and smiled at this confirmation of her mental judgment of him as a Beethoven man, but Mrs. Wakeling wanted the term "brown music"

thrashed out, and, as is usual in such discussions, they lost themselves in a haze of symbolism. Margaret forgot her momentary self-consciousness, and listened critically to what Fawcett said. He spoke directly, she thought, but not dogmatically. He made statements without comment, as if he preferred to expose his limitations and have done with them. "One can't afford to waste time in preliminaries," he had said. Once she caught him looking round at the pictures with a faint smile, and she believed that his reflection coincided with her own, that some of the pictures owed their presence in Mrs. Wakeling's drawing-room less to their beauty than to their nudity.

When Margaret got up to go, Fawcett rose, too, and said that he was coming. She looked at him, gravely questioning his right to accompany her, and he met her glance with eyes as grave as her own. There was nothing to be said. They might have been members of some secret society, pledged to great work, until now unacquainted with each other, but each recognizing the sign that the other bore. They had serious matters to discuss. Margaret was a little pale as she said good night to the Wakelings.

It was her custom to walk home through the

churchyard, which was continuous with the vicarage garden. The October night was moonlit and very still. There was a crisp feeling in the air and a refinement of odors. They went up a steep path, by espalier apple trees; the ungathered fruit among the leaves in that gray light were as if carved in marble. A flight of steps took them up to a terrace walk of the churchyard on the hillside. They were now in the austere atmosphere of yew. Below them was a wide stretch of rolling and partially wooded country, with white roads and great elms, untouched by autumn, standing motionless in their shadows like dark pools at their feet. The murmur of the hidden brook, thin and rustling on the windless air, came up to them. A shabbier glow in the cold purity of the moonlit sky betrayed the position of Bristol.

Margaret drew a deep breath at the solemn beauty of the night, but did not speak. Both were preoccupied. They were not embarrassed; but they hardly knew where to begin. It was as if they had had a great shock, sobering them.

A darker blot upon the gray fields close to a little wood attracted Fawcett's attention, and he asked her what it was.

"It is the Roman Camp," she said; "one of a chain crossing over into South Wales."

"Ah, yes!" he said thoughtfully. "And the Roman road passes here."

"Yes. And now the railway."

Until then it had not occurred to her that, in his unflinching acceptance and undeviating purpose, he was of the Roman type. Recognition of this helped her to say the words that for no reason but the need for explicit understanding had been in her mind:

"My husband is Austin Lisle, the writer."

"Yes, I know," said Fawcett, moving on; "Mrs. Wakeling told me."

"We have not lived together for two years," Margaret continued in a dry tone. "Probably you know what happened. I left him."

He made no comment, but said: "I have read one of Mr. Lisle's books. It was lent me by an admirer of his work—a Doctor Baines. He is a great friend of mine."

She repeated the name.

"Baines. I don't think I know him, do I?"

"Probably not. I don't think he has actually met your husband but he knows friends of his, and has talked to me a great deal about his writing."

He did not give his own opinion of her husband's work, and she concluded that he did not like it. "It is more in the Greek than the Roman spirit," she thought whimsically.

"I live with my brother, Mr. Dixon, and his wife," she went on, in pursuit of her idea that there was danger in the least uncertainty between them.

"Do you intend to live here always?"

"Probably; though I did not mean to when I came here."

He received the remark in silence, and held open the groaning wooden gate of the churchyard, and they passed out and up the hill. At the top a temporary bridge guarded with lights, locally called "Lucy-Janes," tended by a decrepit old man, crossed the cutting, which was full of black shadows. Their feet sounded hollow on the bridge. The old man greeted them in a quavering voice, and Margaret waited for a moment, looking down the line to other lights. Hard by a locomotive simmered in a shed. The navvies' club-room of corrugated iron was lighted up, and the men inside were singing.

"They have good voices," said Margaret.

"Yes; a number of them are Welshmen."

Now that she had made sure of his clear under-

standing of her position, Margaret felt the sort of security that the holder of a fortified place may be supposed to feel after having cut down the brushwood which might give cover to an approaching enemy. They turned the corner, and as he made no sign of stopping at his lodgings she took it for granted that he would walk to her door. They talked about the navvies. He asked her whether, if he hired a piano for the club-room, she would sometimes play to the men.

"Don't you play yourself?"

"No; I have never touched the piano."

"Perhaps they would regard a woman as rather a nuisance. Mr. Wakeling would play if you asked him."

"I believe they would like your playing better."

"Well, I won't promise now. I'll think it over."

The clock of Compton church struck eleven as they passed up the deserted village street, walking in the middle of the white road. Here and there a discreet light burned in an upper room, but most of the houses regarded them with the blank stare of drawn blinds in unlighted windows. At the Dixons' gate, where the two roads divided, they stood for a moment looking at the silvery landscape.

"Good night," said Margaret, and without holding out her hand, turned in at the gate. With her hand on the door, she mechanically counted his footsteps on the hard road. Their regular beat recalled the first movement of the sonata, but they were going away.

Mrs. Dixon had gone to bed, but Charles was in the dining-room, half asleep in an armchair, with a cigar, whisky and the newspaper. The windows were shut, and though the fire was nearly out the room felt stuffy. Charles yawned, and looked up at his sister with a sleepy smile. He was a fair, florid, good-looking man, slightly bald, with a double chin and a brown mustache.

"Well, you've got back!" he said.

Margaret nodded, and sat down with her hat and coat on. She felt a kind of affectionate pity for her brother. He seemed to have given up living too soon. He ate too much, drank too much, and slept too much, because his mind was unoccupied. He had the reputation of being a sound and careful lawyer, but his business, which was mainly automatic, was completely separated from his life. Apparently he never thought of the law as being made for the regulation of human conduct. Directly a man or a woman became a client, they were

removed out of humanity. He had enough money for his material needs; when he died his wife and children would not be left in poverty.

He was a safe man. How easy to live with, thought Margaret, are the safe men. She thought by contrast of her husband, forced into one false position after another by his restless vanity. She disbelieved in the reality of his passions: they were paper passions. Then she remembered something she had read: "You do not expect a poet to put his poetry in his bicycle-riding, but you do expect him to put his bicycle-riding into his poetry." Well, perhaps her husband's aberrations enriched his work. Perhaps Laura Dacre and the others helped him to write better poetry. "It's expensive," she found herself murmuring aloud with a smile, "very expensive."

"What did you say?" said her brother, opening his eyes.

"It is past eleven."

He got up, gave himself a little shake, and stood with his back to the gray fire and his hands in his pockets. He was well set up; he might have been a soldier. After an immense yawn, he said with sudden alertness:

"How are the Wakelings?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Was anybody else there?"

She described Fawcett to him, and he listened with sleepy interest while finishing his whisky.

"Is he a gentleman?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

"I must call upon him," said Charles. "Does he play bridge?"

"I don't know."

He looked surprised, and said:

"What did you talk about, then?"

She tried to tell him. He smiled knowingly and said:

"Of course he sticks up for the railway. What?"

Margaret did not think it worth while to explain Fawcett's point of view, but rose and kissed her brother good night. He waited until she had left the room, and then put out the light, and whistling out of tune, went to fasten the front door.

When Margaret reached her bedroom she sat for a long time with her hands folded. She was not a vain woman, but she recognized clearly and calmly that she was in sight of a situation that she had not provided for in her scheme of life. She was on the edge of one of the big friendships of life, perhaps something more. She must choose now,

and quickly, whether the friendship was to be allowed. In her small circle she and Fawcett were bound to be thrown together; if she intended to avoid Fawcett she must avoid her few friends. Even on their short acquaintance she understood that ordinary negative terms were impossible between them. They must either keep apart or become friends in a vital meaning. If he would take the terms from her, she argued, there could be no danger in that. But would he? Only now she was beginning to understand the difficulties of the married woman separated from her husband. Like most people, she had reckoned on everything depending on herself, as if all the rest of the world were passive.

She ought, she supposed, to go away. But that would not be easy now. During the last two years she had forged bonds for herself. Without self-deception she believed that she had become vitally necessary to several people. She could, of course, support herself anywhere. Yes, and there was human help needed everywhere; but that was not the same thing. Her desertion would make an incalculable difference in the lives of at least three women whose finer possibilities she had herself awakened.

CHAPTER III

SIDNEY BAINES was a specialist in nervous diseases, the author of a *Handbook on Diagnosis* regarded with respect by his colleagues. Though he was a hard worker, his private income enabled him to arrange his leisure according to his tastes, which led him to choose his acquaintances among literary, musical and artistic people. A letter from his friend Henry Fawcett caused him to make use of a long-promised introduction to Austin Lisle, whose work, with certain reservations, he greatly admired. He had heard all about Lisle's domestic affairs, but until he got Fawcett's letter describing Mrs. Lisle the gossip had rather contributed to his willingness to be content with knowing the poet only through his books. Now he felt a distinct curiosity to see and talk to the unfaithful husband of the woman that Fawcett so enthusiastically described.

He was taken to Lisle's house by a young man just down from Cambridge with literary ambitions and an uncle in the peerage. Webster's maternal

great-grandmother had been Irish, and so he wore his hair in a plume over his forehead, aspirated the "h" in which and when, practised crystal-gazing, and wrote poems about the Red Harper. He came, in a carefully disordered knickerbocker suit, to fetch Baines, who had naturally dressed for the evening.

During the long ride from Wimpole Street to Grosvenor Road, where Lisle lived, Baines asked his young companion if he had known Mrs. Lisle, and what he thought of her.

"Mrs. Lisle?" said Webster in a tone that already answered the second half of the question. "Oh, charming enough, but a complete Philistine —all the more virulent for being good-looking and clever. Quite out of sympathy with the movement. I can't think why Lisle married her. She objected to all his friends, and she was very rude to Malcolm Lysaght."

"Who is Malcolm Lysaght?"

"Oh, don't you know? The man who had the little show of *Sapphics* at the Tudor Gallery. A man with a beautiful mind. He loved her—strangely," said Webster, after a momentary hesitation for the adverb.

He further informed Baines that Lisle and Laura

Dacre had never set up house together. Their love was more beautiful even than Lysaght's mind, and a shining protest against the curse of domesticity. Baines reflected that his young friend sometimes chose his words rather well. It was exactly because he suspected Lisle's love of being mainly a protest that he had hitherto failed to take advantage of Webster's pressing desire to introduce him to the poet. He had, of course, seen Laura Dacre on the stage, and admired her as a clever actress trusting too much to the accidents of her singularly interesting appearance; just the sort of woman, he thought, to squander her happiness in a social demonstration.

Lisle's house, facing the river, was lighted in every window, and there seemed to be a large and noisy party in progress in an upper room. The poet received Baines rather languidly, as if he were used to homage as a matter of course. He was a very handsome man of about thirty-five, with a shock of black hair and a mustache that gave his white face an expression of settled melancholy. Most of his guests were a good deal younger than himself, and they seemed to have the freedom of his house to an extraordinary degree, coming and going from rooms in every quarter. Baines thought that Lisle

looked rather like a bored uncle at a children's party.

Among the many surprising people present, perhaps the most surprising was a Roman Catholic priest, a Father Fabian Lester, whose name was familiar to Baines as that of a preacher who flattered a certain section of society by his richly-worded exposition of their supposed vices. He was occasionally reported at length in the newspapers, and was understood to be watched by the Vatican with apprehension. As Webster put it to Baines: "He could explode the whole thing, if he liked, and they know it. So they will make him a cardinal." Father Fabian looked up quickly when he heard the name "Doctor Baines" spoken in introduction, but he did not for the moment appear to take particular notice of the newcomer; and it was only afterward that Baines recognized that the priest had taken some little pains that they should presently sit together. Baines had none of the common British prejudice against the Roman priesthood, but he could not help surmising that the dark, big-nosed, bright-eyed man, lolling good-humoredly with whisky and pipe, was there for other than purely social reasons. It was evident that he deliberately suppressed some of his intelligence to keep on the

level of the other guests; not so successfully, however, as to prevent him looking like the slightly Satanic master of revels that hugely amused him. To Baines he expressed his opinion of the company with the greatest frankness.

"We are all Protestants," he said with the flattering assumption that Baines would understand his double meaning, "worshipers of Mrs. Anti-Grundy to a boy. We've discovered the great secret, that, if you can't stand firmly on your own feet, the next best thing to do is to stand on your head and wave your legs in the air. Our daily prayer is that conventionality may flourish. There's a most distressing tendency in the world to-day not to be surprised or shocked at anything. If nobody takes any notice of us, where are we? For heaven's sake, try to pay us the compliment of looking outraged; if you keep such an impassive face you'll be regarded as a public enemy."

Baines observed that Father Fabian kept a keen eye on Lisle, and that when the two men came together for a moment there was an interchange of Christian names and sympathetic glances between them. Lisle was looking tired and worried. He was, as Baines knew, at a very critical stage of his

career. His last play, *A King's Ransom,* was proving anything but a success. A loyal band of critics still kept up the graceful fiction that his work was too literary for the ordinary theater-going public; only here and there some irreverent young man ventured to assert the plain truth that it was essentially undramatic.

"Lisle," said Father Fabian to Baines, when the poet had left them, "is paying for his past sins. Oh, no," he interjected, as Baines raised his eyebrows, "I'm not speaking professionally. For that matter, while you as a rationalist hold that nature never forgives, I claim that holy church is greater than nature. What I meant was that our charming fellow guests represent early mistakes of our only poet. He has developed—I've got the proofs of his last volume to show how wonderfully he has developed, and there'll be some sorry dogs in Grub Street in the spring, by the way—but he has to carry the results of his earlier experiments in living round his neck. It is a pretty piece of evolution that should please you. Each of these altogether admirable young men and women represents the survival to date of some fashion in wearing the manners or the morals that he threw off in passing.

Strange monsters! Is he going to win clear? You as a psychologist, I as a theologian, ought to put our heads together. Watch him now."

The tone of the last sentence was hardly above a murmur, but, without seeming to move his hand, and still smiling urbanely, the priest had gripped Baines' arm with sudden intensity.

Lisle was crossing the room, and to the doctor's eye there was something startlingly significant in his walk—a jerkiness as from a surplus of energy, the first fantastic steps of a dance of death. At the same moment Baines was convinced that it was exactly this peculiarity in Lisle's walk that the priest had called his attention to, and that he was aware of its tragic meaning. Baines was, however, a good actor, and his voice betrayed nothing as he said:

"Literary prophecy is not one of my weaknesses, but I should say that Lisle is big enough for anything."

Still smiling, the priest dropped his thick eyelids, and after a moment rose, saying, "Human nature in all its aspects has such a fascination for me that if we sit here much longer I shall be beguiling you into talking shop."

The actual guests of the evening were an au-

reoled composer and his nun-like interpreter on the piano. Mr. Eustace Adams, Saxon to his tip-tilted nose, had written a new rhapsody—*Une Nuit de Messaline*— and this was its first performance. So far as Baines could judge, Mr. Adams had a small talent, with trimmings, but obviously at Lisle's house the trimmings were the thing. The supposed relations between the composer and his interpreter were the theme of discussion and argument even while the music was going on. Baines thought that Miss Rosamund Image, who played remarkably well, looked rather too good for trimmings, and he hoped that she had an elder brother with a preference for field sports.

Now that he was able to give his undivided attention to the assembly, Baines recognized that it could not be altogether included in Father Fabian's contemptuous summary. Though it was true that the greater number of the guests appeared to be clever but rather foolish young men and women, desperately bent on being "advanced," and as jealous of their sedulously acquired eccentricities of manner as little girls at a Sunday-school treat of their best clothes, there were a few people who, to a student of human nature, made the gathering more significant. Here and there Baines recognized

a face or a name that stood for something in art or letters beyond the desire to create a sensation. He surmised that, in the social emancipation that followed the removal of the blight of domesticity from Lisle's home, some of his older and solider friends had stuck to him.

It struck Baines as remarkable that the opinion he had already unconsciously formed from chance references to Lisle's domestic affairs was that nobody seemed to take the two-year-old scandal very seriously. It was as if Lisle had committed a solecism rather than a breach of morals, and his friends had agreed to disregard it as one disregards bad manners in a philosopher. The reason, as Baines understood, was not that the poet's friends thought lightly of morals, but that they put morality, if not on a higher, at least on a more human, plane than the conventional code, summed up in the general commandment, "Thou shall not wantonly hurt thy fellow creature." Few intelligent people nowadays questioned the right of a man and woman to rebel against the technical barriers between them, if they cared sufficiently and the circumstances justified their rebellion. The whole question was, did they care and did the circumstances justify them? As far as Baines could judge from the chance remarks

of people who were in a position to know, the answer in the case of Lisle and Laura Dacre, at any rate to the latter half of the question, was in the negative. They had been guilty of shockingly bad taste, but as rebels they frankly had not "come off." They had committed a quite unnecessary overstatement of the case for youth and genius against society. They had waved their flag of revolt—Baines smiled, remembering the egregious gentleman with the Union Jack in *Stalky and Co.*—and people had looked the other way. From these facts, from Fawcett's letter, and from Webster's observations, Baines was forming by inference a consistent picture of Mrs. Lisle that interested him peculiarly. He also looked forward to seeing Laura Dacre, who, he understood, was coming round from the theater that night. He wanted to see her and Lisle together. It was plainly evident that Lisle already regretted the minor consequences of his wife's desertion as expressed in a crowd of slangy young women and untidy young men, and Baines was conscious of a quite unholy curiosity to see how far, by this time, he regretted Laura Dacre.

Less pleasing to Baines than the company of Lisle's more discriminating admirers, though not less significant, was the presence of two or three

men who clearly belonged to quite another social section. It seemed incredible that they were brought there by any interest in the arts, and Baines was inclined to believe that in relation to the Lisle circle they represened the smart hangers-on at stage doors, and that they were attracted by similar propensities. At Lisle's house refreshment was understood to be plentiful and manners free.

Here and there was a type to be explained on less dubious grounds: the professional jackal of a public man. Among them, Baines noticed a gross-featured and not very clean old man with a tangled white beard and small sly eyes. He knew him by name as a pathetic survival of an earlier literary convention who had gained the reputation of a wit on the strength of three epigrams, two of which were afterward discovered to have been borrowed from the classics. He was still a pungent paragraphist, and no doubt useful to Lisle. He sat silent the whole evening, steadily drinking whatever came his way. "Algy," as everybody called him, never got drunk, but he was seldom quite sober. He had arrived at being able to judge with nicety the last possible moment when he could leave a room in a dignified manner, and he never outstayed that moment.

It was nearly midnight when Laura Dacre arrived from the theater. She made a superb entrance, sailing up to Lisle as if she had eyes for him only, with something of the effect of a well-handled ship, and falling into a chair as if she had reached her soul's haven. All the tokens of a sad, mad, bad, inevitable passion were in her looks as she took a glass of sherry from Lisle's hand. Baines thought that there ought to have been music; that they ought to have applauded. Lisle's manner, he fancied, though fond, was a trifle apologetic. He did not—the phrase came of itself—play up to her.

By night, at least, Laura Dacre was extraordinarily effective. She was tall and very thin, with hollow cheeks, large brilliant eyes and black hair. She looked wasted by the ardor of her spirit rather than by ill-health. She trailed her clothes as if she had caught them up in a passion, divinely careless whether they became her or not. Her manner was as if, lately come from another star, she found this earth eternally new and strange, and knowing and caring nothing about customs or traditions, readjusted human values by the touchstone of her own eager emotions. One felt that she would have snubbed a king and kissed a dying beggar with the same glad innocence. Quick to tears, she would

laugh at the most unexpected moments when everybody else, even the most frivolous, had agreed to be solemn. One would as soon have accused a fawn of posing.

She was talking now in an eager quivering voice about the cabman who had driven her from the theater.

"I asked him if he did not love the night, and he said, 'Not 'arf, lidy. My fare is two and a tizzy, and don't you forget it. I've been to this 'ouse before, and I've 'ad some.' I did not know what a tizzy was," she added wistfully, "so I gave him half a sovereign, and he bit it to see if it was good. But what a shame!" she cried, looking round with accusing eyes, her voice thrilling on the word "shame" with the deep note of an oboe, "to kill the poetry in that man's nature by cheating him of his fare! Think of him on his high seat, driving lovers nightly to their joy! You," she cried impulsively, catching Lysaght by the arm, "shall do a nocturne in pastel and give it to me. A happy boy in evening dress—you'll do," with a nod to Webster, who blushed between pleasure at being singled out and pain at being called happy, "handing a dear painted girl into a hansom, with the title *Embarquons-nous pour la Cythère.* Can't you see it? The blaring

lights of the hansom, the sting of the cigarette end, the broad white smudge of shirt-front, and just a peep of frillies, against the purple circus!"

When Baines was introduced to her she said in a tone of awe:

"Oh, you are a doctor? What a strange life. We tell you everything, and yet you are not afraid. If I were a doctor I should help all unhappy people to die."

Supper, which had evidently been deferred for Laura Dacre's arrival, was now announced, and Baines found himself coldly adopted by a pale young person in a blue kimono, who had the drawl and the manner of withholding the gaze, wearing the mouth, and moving the limbs which are among the minor and less admirable accomplishments acquired by students at a justly celebrated metropolitan school of painting. That his companion had not neglected the more serious business of her education in art was made clear to Baines when she observed on the stairs that Miss Rosamund Image was quite sickeningly beautiful, and that supper was rather futile; and then asked him for a complete statement of his views upon the philosophy of Nietzsche.

The impression he received of the supper-table

was a more definite revival of that he had already gained by half-conscious apprehension of the furniture and decoration of the room up-stairs. It was the impression of an eager and imperfectly considered acquisition of the last thing out. The supper-table was generously ordered, but there was, to put it crudely—and this was not the complaint of a hungry man—too much sauce to too little meat. You were embarrassed by the variety of hors-d'œuvres and liqueurs, but you had to look around for honest bread and wine. In Lisle's house and at his table—as among his guests—taste was a little obtruded, as mere substance is apt to be in the houses of the nouveaux riches. Indeed, if Baines had been a writer of essays, he would have tried to put his impression of the scene into a paper on the nouveaux riches in culture. He felt that there might be people there, for example, who could tell you all about Gustave Moreau, but to whom William Blake was merely a name; who would speak with authority about the instrumentation of Richard Strauss' last symphonic poem, but who had never studied a bar of Beethoven. If Lisle's house reflected his life, thought Baines, his life wanted organization badly. It was the house of a man who had not quite the courage or the knowledge of his own prefer-

ences, and that this character in his material surroundings really was a reflection of his inner life seemed probable from the quality which was at once the defect and the promise of his writing. Baines was not alone in his opinion that, at his comparatively mature age, and in spite of his success, Lisle had not yet come to his own as a poet. As he sat there pursuing these reflections, interrupted by the gloomy comments of his neighbor, the doctor was more than ever persuaded that Lisle's domestic aberrations were less the result of passion or depravity than of the desperate fear of being left behind in the progress toward what he conceived to be emancipation. In morals as in culture he had, in a popular phrase, gone in for the last thing out.

Already, apparently, the character of his disciples made him doubt whether in his quest of the land of freedom he had not taken the wrong turning; whether, in fact, he had not merely exchanged one convention for another and sillier. Presently he would settle down in life, as in art, to his real vocation; but meanwhile, thought Baines, it was impossible not to sympathize with Mrs. Lisle.

CHAPTER IV

LISLE, indeed, was very tired of it all. So long as his wife had lived with him, so long as he had a grievance, it had seemed necessary to assert his freedom from conventionality, to surround himself with the rag, tag and bobtail of calculated Bohemianism; but now he wanted his house to himself. After thirty-five a man begins to lose interest in the merely picturesque side of life, and to value things for their own sakes. He disliked the manners of these young people; one or two of them were inclined to take liberties with him. They evidently began to regard him as an old fogy, and used him for their own ends. His house had been used—to put it frankly—for purposes which had brought him almost within reach of the law. There had been scandals. An inconvenient husband or wife, losing patience, had behaved in a crudely Philistine manner, and Lisle's servants had been called upon to give evidence.

To-night he was irritable. He glanced round the

table, and with the exception of Laura and Father Fabian, he could see hardly a man or a woman there that he could call his friend. He had to repress an insane impulse to get up and cry, "Out of my house, the whole pack of you!"

They ate and they drank. He had been spending a great deal of money lately. That day he had had his publisher's accounts. There was a serious falling off in the sales of his books. There were new stars on the horizon; they were talked about even at his table.

Meanwhile there was the necessity for being bright and original. He was not in the mood for talking, and he was conscious of being watched by three people: Laura, Father Fabian and the newcomer—what was his name?—Baines. Baines was a doctor. Lisle had never needed a doctor in his life; he did not need one now. Why did Baines watch him? That was the worst of these materialistic men of science, they were always on the lookout for some imaginary confirmation of their beastly creed. Possibly he was a little pale. He was not ill, but he had not been quite himself lately. He suffered from bad rheumatic pains, and these irregular meals disagreed with him. The other morning when he got out of his bath, as he covered his

face with the towel, he had unaccountably fallen forward. This momentary giddiness had puzzled him at the time; but now he understood what caused it. There was evidently a little something wrong with his digestion. He must be more careful of his diet. One can not live forever on caviar and green Chartreuse, and he was approaching middle age. He sighed, stretched out his hand and added water to his wine.

Father Fabian had noticed his weariness and preoccupation, and was tactfully drawing the conversation to his end of the table. Lisle was grateful to him. They were talking about religion: Christian science, mental science, theosophy, Babism—somebody had recently rediscovered the Orient—all the attempts which men, broken from the old creeds but without courage to accept life on their own responsibility, make to adjust themselves to the infinite.

"Yes, yes," said Father Fabian, leaning back in his chair and urbanely smiling, "part of the truth, but not the truth. There is nothing new; you will find parallels in the old heresies. The church has had to face them all before. Indeed, they are all included in the church: they are only heresies because they set up one part of truth at the expense of

another part. As if you, Doctor Baines, singled out one fact of evolution—say protective coloring—and based your whole scientific creed on that."

"What I want," said Laura Dacre in her emotional voice, "is a religion that is not forever saying 'Thou shalt not.' I don't mind giving up my will if I am allowed to follow my impulses. All the creeds seem to be made for men. Give us poor women a religion that we can love in."

"I have been a Buddhist for years," said Mr. Eustace Adams, the composer, speaking almost for the first time. He was twenty-five.

Not to be outdone, Mr. Lysaght asked a conundrum: "What is the difference between a Mohammedan and a Christian place of worship?" Nobody knew, and he explained. "On entering one you leave your shoes outside; on entering the other you must leave your head outside."

Lisle thought impatiently that Laura forced the note. Of course she loved him, but why need she say so in public? She kept things at such a pitch. Less and less he felt inclined to insist on the more demonstrative, the more spectacular side of their association. He hoped that Laura was not going to begin to complain that he neglected her. That, of course, was nonsense. It was true that he had not

been to see her very often lately, but he had been worried about his work, and was it not the very essence of their compact that they should take each other for granted? But was any woman strong enough to keep on those terms with the man she loved? Laura was an apt disciple of his gospel of freedom, but he knew very well that if two years ago he had asked her to sacrifice her individual career and become the mistress of his house she would have been glad to do so. He wondered if she would be willing now. She was, of course, in a very different position now with regard to her profession; still—he wondered. Obviously to-night she had something in her mind. She did not talk much, but she kept watching him. Was she jealous? He smiled bitterly to think how little cause she had for jealousy—unless it was of Father Fabian, who seemed to be the only real friend he had left.

A tactless man who had come late from a theater was talking about a new play by a new author, *Here or Nowhere.*

"The extraordinary thing about it is the simplicity with which the effects are produced," he said. "It reminds you of 'Let your conversation be yea, nay,' and yet it is full of the complexity of modern life. I've never seen anything like it. Only Pauline

Opie, as the heroine, is weak. I'd like to see you in that part, Miss Dacre."

She smiled faintly and glanced at Lisle. How loyal she was! He felt a warm glow of gratitude, and rewarded her with his eyes. Though it was true that he had first brought her into notice, he really owed her a great deal. He ought perhaps to concede a little to her feminine weakness. For a moment he pictured her at the head of his house, but dismissed the vision with a smile. Seriously, that was impossible.

A few minutes later he felt rather sore that Laura should think it necessary to assert her loyalty to him. That implied that he was a falling star. Oh, he would show them, he thought, moving irritably in his chair.

He roused himself to take part in the conversation. They were talking about the simple life. Miss Image, the nun-like pianist, had refused to eat or drink anything except bread and grapes and a little milk. Laura Dacre, leaning her long white arms on the table, was eagerly asking her if it was true that by confining herself to that diet and by practising deep breathing she was able to hold communication with Chopin. The poor girl, embarrassed by the not unkindly but frankly amused ex-

pression on Baines' face, blushed and stammered and appealed to Mr. Eustace Adams to help her out. But he, rather sulky at the neglect of his own spiritual experiences, which had been declared old-fashioned, disclaimed all knowledge of her alleged power.

"Never mind, Miss Image," said Lisle, "we'll witness that you have given him fair warning now, and when he attains Nirvana he'll find it difficult to outwit his rival."

"Unless he makes haste to swallow him whole," said Father Fabian blandly. "He's getting on very well," and he hummed an unfortunately reminiscent phrase from the *Nuit de Messaline.*

Everybody laughed, and Laura, rising, led the way up-stairs.

By twos and threes people began to leave. Presently Baines, the doctor, came up to Lisle to say good night. The poet felt an extraordinary impulse to confide in this pleasant, clever-looking young man. He wanted somebody to lean upon; somebody who stood aside from all this calculated madness of minor art; somebody who had no ends to serve by being other than himself. Absently following him down-stairs, he grasped his hand in his impressive way. "Come again," he said fervently,

"come again!" Baines moved slightly under the light, and looked into his face with keen friendly eyes, as he said that he certainly would. Easily moved, Lisle put his hand on his arm and began a sentence.

"I want a talk—" and left it unfinished. There was a moment of embarrassment, and then Baines said good night.

As Lisle reentered the room a discussion ended abruptly, but not soon enough to prevent his hearing the last words. They had been talking about the new play, *Here or Nowhere,* and they wanted to spare him. Laura pleaded with a smile for him to come and sit beside her. His hipped and sensitive mood responded to her womanly sympathy, but he hoped that she was not going to be unduly sentimental. He guessed from her manner that she had something particular to say, and he was afraid that she was insisting on her loyalty in order presently to reproach him for his apparent coldness. He wanted to be petted, not to be wrung. In the act of sitting down he caught Father Fabian looking at him with slightly raised eyebrows and a smile that was half ironical, half protesting. As one person after another went away he became aware that Laura and the priest were sitting each other out. Father

Fabian was diabolically perceptive: this was not the first time that he had intervened to protect Lisle from one of Laura's moods; had stayed on, smiling and imperturbable, while she waited to tear a passion to rags. Lisle had been grateful; less and less he cared for scenes of high emotion. His nerves would not stand it; he wanted quiet.

But to-night Father Fabian was clearly wanting in tact. Lisle could feel that Laura was getting impatient. She had something to say, but she was too proud to make any open sign that she wanted the priest to go. Outwardly Lisle was the only one of the three who showed discomfort. He moved restlessly about the room while the others talked with smooth politeness, but showing their mutual dislike in every phrase. They were the priest and the woman; the two forces that for centuries have been opposed.

At last Laura arose abruptly, as if she had made up her mind to something. She said good night to the priest, with a bantering remark, and a sleepy servant brought her cloak and called a hansom. During the interval Laura walked about the room looking at pictures and humming a tune. Lisle went with her down-stairs: he was half relieved, half annoyed, that she had been defeated. He knew that

she would not say what she had to say now. Her manner, he thought, as he put her into the cab, was ironically tender. He kissed her hand, and she sighed. Standing in the cool air from off the river, he watched her drive away.

CHAPTER V

FATHER FABIAN came forward with an air of affectionate concern when Lisle reentered the room.

"My dear fellow," said the priest, "you look worn to fiddle-strings. Do lie down. Just one more pipe and a quiet talk. Oh, please let me help myself!" as Lisle moved mechanically toward a tray of glasses. "I'll mix you a drink, too."

They settled themselves before the fire, Lisle on a sofa and Father Fabian in a deep armchair.

"Tell me if you want to go to bed."

Lisle made a sign dissenting.

"Nice fellow, Baines," the priest went on, spreading his thin hands to the fire. Lisle moved irritably, but said nothing, and Father Fabian continued: "Rather an uncommon type, or at least a type I have not yet studied. He illustrates the enormous advance that has been made in material science during the last ten years or so. What an improvement on the old empiric, with his drugs and his dog-

matism! I had a most interesting conversation with him, and I was surprised to learn what a wide field is covered by a doctor's work nowadays, particularly the work of a specialist in nervous diseases."

"He is a specialist, then?" asked Lisle, turning his head.

"Quite celebrated, for his age. I had heard of him before. Father Sullivan told me about him. He was called in to see a probationer at the Convent of the Paraclete. We can not be too careful nowadays to distinguish between real ecstasy and hysteria. We are watched so closely. Manifestations which half a century ago would have been claimed without scruple are now discarded. It would never do to give people an opportunity of saying, 'I have seen your "miracle" in an asylum.' "

"I'm shockingly ignorant of contemporary science," said Lisle. "What exactly are meant by nervous diseases?"

The priest laughed gently.

"Every day apparently the field widens. Read Lombroso, and you'll be persuaded that there isn't such a thing as a healthy man or woman left. There are men who will tell you that religion and all art are nervous diseases. But the less extravagant men —men like our friend Baines, for example—would

confine the term to all diseases which proceed from some definite affection of the brain, the spinal cord, or the nerves themselves. Of course, even with this limitation, their forms are legion, and range from general paralysis to neuralgia. But the interesting thing to me is the way these men seem to approach their subject. Like artists, they are always on the lookout for material: they study it at all times and seasons. Baines assured me that frequently on a railway journey he has 'spotted his man,' as he would say, and he described the curious impersonal joy of seeing his predictions verified. He seems to have arrived at an extraordinary power of prediction. He told me stories that are almost incredible."

A morbid curiosity seized upon Lisle, and he encouraged the priest to talk until his nerves were thoroughly unstrung. Then a chance phrase awakened his suspicions. Had Lester noticed anything wrong with him beyond the fact that he was tired and depressed? He glanced at him narrowly, but there was no sign of intention on the handsome aquiline face, with its curious solidity of outline.

"He seems to have made a great impression on you," said Lisle rather querulously.

"He has. He gave me the effect of reliability

and that impersonal interestedness which is so valuable a quality in my own order. Theoretically, of course, the man and the priest are always distinct, but in practise it often happens that from want of breeding or intelligence in the individual they are confused. I have known good priests who could not conceal their repugnance to sin. It is so much easier to make a clean breast to an agent who does not all the time remind you that he is a man with prejudices like your own. Curiously, too, this power of detachment is most common if not peculiar to men of great personality. Yes," he said, throwing the end of his cigarette into the fire, "Doctor Baines would be an easy man to confide in. Don't you think so?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Lisle, with an irritable laugh. "I did not pay all that attention to him. I haven't thought about the matter. I'm not a sick man."

The last sentence was said rather defiantly. Father Fabian sipped his whisky before he spoke again.

"No, thank God," he said emphatically; "you've never been an invalid, Austin, mentally or physically. You are a wonder: so full of life, so prodigal of energy at an age when most of us begin to

find it necessary to look at the small change. But to return to Baines. He interests me peculiarly because of the similarity between our vocations. It is our business to look out for the first, almost imperceptible, signs of disease; to gain confidence, to give counsel. Of course I claim that mine is the higher vocation: it is in my power as a priest to absolve all the diseases of the soul. There is no absolution anywhere for some of the ills of the body. But I bore you—and you are tired."

"Oh, no!" said Lisle.

"If I were in bodily trouble—which God forbid! —I should go to Baines."

He arose to take a cigarette from a box on the mantelpiece, and in lighting it his keen glance rested on Lisle as he lay stretched on the sofa. But the poet showed no sign of embarrassment.

"Laura had something to say," said Father Fabian abruptly as he sat down again.

"Yes," said Lisle; "she was waiting for you to go."

"You didn't mind?"

"I'm only human, Fabian," said Lisle in a low voice.

The priest looked grave.

"You must not let generosity lead you into weak-

ness," he said. "No good can come of the resuscitation of something that is finished. Even as a man of the world I'm sure of that. Of course, as a priest —I may be quite frank, Austin?"

"Yes, of course."

"As you know, I interpret my duty as a priest in the most liberal way. Many people would say that I am too liberal, but I have never believed that the church is best served by cowardice. From my point of view as a priest you sinned grievously, but, so far as I know, you are no longer living in sin. Therefore, I can come to your house, I can be your guest, your friend. But I can't condone any approach to sin again. You see my position, don't you? I have no right, I have no wish, to interfere in the management of your affairs; but whenever you openly resume guilty relations I can no longer come to your house, I can not be your friend. As a man of the world, I say it is a mistake; as a priest I am compelled to denounce it."

"You need not worry about that," said Lisle; "I've no intention of altering my way of living."

"I quite believe that you have no intention. What I am afraid of is your mistaken generosity."

"You think that Laura is dissatisfied?"

"Can you doubt it? If I could forget the wrong

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of it all, I should say that her love for you was the most beautiful thing in the world. One has only to see her come into the room with her eyes instinctively on the spot where you are to realize that she lives for you."

"I suppose you are right," Lisle admitted.

"In the abstract," said the priest, dusting cigarette ash from his knee, "a devotion like that is altogether admirable."

"Why do you say, 'in the abstract'?"

"Well, the bent of my mind is analytical. While it is your business as a poet to confine yourself to beautiful phenomena, my vocation compels me to go deeper—to find out the springs of them. At the bottom of Laura's devotion to you I find the danger that I spoke of. The love of women, though apparently a more reckless, a more generously self-abandoning form of passion than that of men, is, in reality, much more calculating, more selfish. It is not, perhaps, consciously selfish, but it has an end, an aim, and that aim is security of possession. I very much doubt whether any woman is a rake. The natural craving of every woman is for the home, the hearth; to make sure of the man—to hold him. Through all the aberrations of a woman's love you can trace that main principle. Very often the

woman herself does not know it; therefore, I say, her love is not consciously selfish. The woman who is apparently fickle, who loves one man after another, proves nothing. She is still in search of the mate, and the permanent mate. I could tell you stories, Baines could tell you stories—but for the etiquette of his profession—and the most astonishing thing about them would be their similarity. At the bottom of them all is the fine domestic craving, the desire for folded wings, for repose, for, as a living poet has finely said, 'The trio perfect: the man, the woman, and the babe: And herein all creation.' That is what makes all this outcry against marriage so foolish. Marriage is, and always will be, the natural relation. Free love is impossible; you have a whole sex against it. It is absolutely true that women invented morality. The indissolubility of marriage is not an invention of the church; it is based upon the primitive instincts of all womanhood."

"You are assuming a great deal," said Lisle. "I hardly think it is quite as simple as that. There is the artist woman, the woman with personal ambitions."

The priest laughed.

"Forgive me, my dear man," he said, "but of all

the poetical conventions about women that is the most hollow. There are sexless women, of course, women of genius; but Baines would tell you that in any computation of average women they must be left out. However keen the average woman may seem on her profession, it goes down before her deeper instinct for the home. Generally, of course, her profession is only an unconscious attempt to widen her field of selection in choosing her mate."

"I don't understand you, Fabian," said Lisle fretfully; "you say that it is foolish to resuscitate anything that is finished, and then you turn round and say that from the woman's point of view it never is finished."

The priest was silent for a few moments, and then he said gravely:

"True; you have pushed me back to my base. I must leave it as a paradox, or—"

"Well?"

"Or I must be impertinent."

"Oh, that's nonsense, Fabian. You know that you may say what you like."

"Well, I'm glad of that, Austin," said the priest gratefully, "because if one can't talk about these things fundamentally it's better not to talk about them at all. I'm not going to preach to you now,

but don't you see that the essential evil of all irregular connections is just the confusion they cause? You are married—that is to say, you have entered into indissoluble relations with one woman. You are attracted by another woman, and from whatever reason, vanity, weakness, passion, or what, I don't pretend to say, you fall into sin. After a time, you —I don't say you repent—but you discontinue your sin. But it does not end there. You have entered into indissoluble relations with another woman. So far as you are concerned, it is finished, but for her you have set going an eternity of consequences."

"Surely, then, the best thing to do is frankly to accept the consequences."

"In the case of which woman?" said the priest blandly.

"I see what you mean," said Lisle after a pause. "But my wife will never come back to me," he added thickly.

"I don't say she will," said the priest; "but you don't mend matters by accepting the other woman as your wife, though for her that is the logical and desirable conclusion."

"Oh, it's all too complicated for me," said Lisle impatiently. "I'm quite willing to admit that I made a mistake, but it's no use talking about that

now. I'm tired; I'm not young any more. I've had enough of passion: I need a woman's care. I want somebody to look after my house; somebody that I can trust. I said that I had no intention of altering my way of living, but frankly I'm beginning to believe that I could not do better than ask Laura Dacre to live with me as my wife. The wrong can't be righted, anyhow; if I could marry her I would. But there's the question," he added with a sigh, "would she make the sacrifice?"

"There's no doubt about that."

"Oh, I believe she cares for me enough, but she also cares for her profession. Of course I should not ask her to give it up altogether, but domestic life would necessarily interfere with it. Her career as an artist would be ended."

"If you ask me," said Father Fabian, "I don't think she would worry much about that. But—putting my friendship on one side, for, as I said, I could not come to your house while you were living openly in sin—think of the enormous sacrifices you would be called upon to make!"

"She would leave me free. We understand each other perfectly."

The priest shook his head.

"No, Austin; however you look at it, it would be

a mistake. You are not so young as you were, neither of you. The first flush of passion is over; I doubt whether you really care for her very much now. What you feel is a mixture of generosity and remorse. There would be little adjustments, compromises—not important in themselves, but in the long run absolutely fatal to your work. It is bad enough to domesticate the recording angel," he added with a laugh, "but it is ten thousand times worse to domesticate the Egeria."

"Oh, as for my work," said Lisle bitterly, "I've done my best. I'm superseded. Already they run after new gods."

"Nonsense, man," said the priest energetically, and rising from his chair. "This proves what I feared. You are probably at the most dangerous crisis of your life, and if you don't keep your head you will fall a victim to your own generosity. You are going through a time of ferment, of growth; your very depression proves how you are developing. Look at the facts bravely; don't be afraid. Grant the worst, that you have exhausted a vein; what of that? You are in the prime of life, in the full activity of your intellect. At the risk of wounding you I'm going to give you my candid opinion. It seems to me that you have said all that you have

to say in the form of the drama. You have worried me so much to-night that I had almost forgotten the chief reason for which I stayed. I wanted to talk about the new poems."

"You've read all the proofs, then?" said Lisle with ill-suppressed eagerness.

"I have," said the priest. He waited for a moment before going on, and when he spoke again, lowered his voice to an almost reverential tone. "Much as I have always loved and admired your work, Austin," he said, "this is a revelation to me. Unless I am very much mistaken, it will be a revelation to the world. I believe that you are only on the edge of your real reputation. Instead of finishing you are only beginning your work. You have only now found yourself."

"You really think that, Fabian?"

"I do, sincerely. To use a quite inadequate phrase, you have struck a deeper note. For my part, I shall never be too thankful that you became dissatisfied with the dramatic form. I believe that it hampered you. You used it admirably, but you did not use it to express the real depths of your nature. If you had gone on writing drama you would have remained a brilliant success—in spite of this momentary setback—but the essential you

would never have been uttered. Of course I'm not posing as a critic; I merely state my personal conviction."

He had a great deal of emotion at his command, and it is probable that he spoke sincerely. Lisle was impressed, and too excited to recognize that one of the perhaps unconscious reasons for the priest's enthusiasm was betrayed in his next words.

"You know, Austin," he said with engaging hesitation, as he sat down again, "there is another reason why these poems interest me peculiarly. I hardly like to talk about it, because it seems like breaking a condition, never imposed in words, it is true, but always understood between us—you know what I mean?"

Lisle nodded.

"Well, then, it seemed to me that in all these poems your genius has anticipated your will, that they are in a sense prophetic. I have observed our unspoken condition faithfully, but I'm not going to pretend that I have not been keenly on the watch for any sign, however slight, that the condition would some day be no longer necessary. I was determined to wait for the sign; never to approach you, always to wait. Am I trespassing now?"

"No, my dear fellow; of course not."

"We of the church," went on the priest in his musical voice, "are often accused of going out of our way to make converts. That may be true of some individuals; I don't question the purity of their motives; it is a defect of intelligence, because the church can wait. But I should not be fulfilling my duty if I observed the condition a moment after you were ready to speak. You know that it is the desire of my life to see you within the church. I ought to say this; I should not be honest if I did not. I pray for you daily."

Lisle shook his head with a smile.

"Thank you, Fabian," he said, clearing his throat. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I can't honestly say that I am aware of what you read in my poems. It is true that lately I have not felt so certain that there is nothing on the other side. But I am not conscious of any craving for a definite belief. I am unsettled, but not in that way. I am not a scoffer: I can see the beauty of your creed, the advantage to certain temperaments, of the peace that comes from giving up one's will."

"Well," said Father Fabian, rising, "I've no wish to press the point now. I don't despair of you, but until you approach me yourself I shall not speak of these things again. But"—with a laugh—"you

must forgive me if I still hold to my opinion that in your latest poems you have builded better than you know; that your subliminal self, or whatever the tricksy sprite that guides your pen may be called, has moved a step nearer to the light. Meanwhile, my dear man," he continued in a tone of affectionate concern, "do take care of yourself. You are much too precious to be put out of the running. Try to sleep. God bless you! No, don't come down. I'll let myself out. By the way," he added from the door, "if Baines comes again you might let me know. I should like to talk to him again; he is a remarkably interesting man."

CHAPTER VI

FOR two or three days Austin Lisle lived in the glow of Father Fabian's enthusiasm over his new poems. He was a sound enough critic of his own work to feel tolerably certain that the priest had not overrated them. For the first time in his life he had written with a single mind, with no pose to support, no esthetic theory to prove; and consequently, the strain of artifice which had hitherto disfigured his writing was absent. For better or worse, he had expressed his own emotions in his own way. But the mood of satisfaction quickly passed. He was suffering from the inevitable reaction that follows a long-continued exercise of the creative faculty. He felt tired and old. If the poems could have been published immediately, the praise which they were certain to receive would no doubt have tided him through this period of depression. He called upon his publisher to suggest that the book should come out before Christmas instead of in the following spring, as had been arranged,

but the acute man of business, with figures to back him, was strongly against the proposal. As tactfully as he could he pointed out to Lisle that he was at a critical stage in his literary career. He had exhausted the enthusiasm that greeted his earlier poems, and he had, at any rate so far as the general public was concerned, proved the very limited terms on which he was to be accepted as a dramatist.

"About the future there can be no doubt whatever," said the publisher apologetically, as if he were ashamed of affirming a thing so obvious, "but just for the moment we shall do well to take advantage of every favorable circumstance that the conventions of the trade allow. The book will have a big success, but it wants handling."

He was too competent a judge to be disregarded, and so Lisle was faced with the prospect of several months during which he was likely to be reminded only of his temporarily waning popularity.

In this lull of mental energy the body with its infirmities naturally asserted itself. Over and over again, and each time with increasing force, Lisle was reminded that there was something gravely wrong with his health. What, he did not know. He thought of Baines, and tried to remember exactly what he was doing when he had found the young

doctor looking at him. The occasion came back clearly. He was crossing the room to speak to one of his guests when he had caught Baines' deep-set blue eyes fixed on him so interestedly that Father Fabian, who was sitting beside him, had to lay his hand on his arm to attract his attention to some remark he smilingly made. The surprised look on the doctor's face remained so vividly in his mind that more than once he found himself taking particular notice of the way he walked. By comparing his movements with other people's he came to the conclusion that he walked with unusual buoyancy, as if from an actual overplus of energy, and Kipling's line, "He trod the ling like a buck in spring," came into his head with a flattering application to himself. There was nothing wrong with his walk. He remembered that in taking leave of him Baines had maneuvered slightly as if to get him to face the light. There was nothing in that, of course; a habitual student of character would naturally try to get the most complete impression of an interesting personality. But though these particular instances of Baines' attention could be dismissed as meaningless, there still remained the vague persistent suspicion that his interest was professional. Lisle began to feel toward him some-

thing of the criminal's feeling toward a person he suspects of knowing him guilty—a mixture of fear and dislike, together with the desire to conciliate.

There were times when he thought of going to Baines and making a clean breast of his fears. It would be better to know the worst. This mood would continue until he had almost decided to write and fix an appointment with the doctor. Then, without any apparent reason, he would feel so much better that he began to laugh at his imaginary ailments. He was so young, so vigorous. In all probability he had been ludicrously mistaken in supposing that Baines had noticed anything wrong with him. He had been morbidly self-conscious that evening; his publisher's accounts, the stupid fellow who had talked about the success of *Here or Nowhere,* Laura Dacre's importunate sentimentality, had all helped to upset him. As an illustration of the unbalanced condition he was in, he had even suspected Father Fabian of being worried about his health—a suspicion that had proved to be groundless. He repeated to himself the priest's actual words:

"You are a wonder; so full of life, so prodigal of energy, at an age when most of us begin to find it necessary to look at the small change."

For a week he felt so well that he began to look back on his apprehensions with wondering amusement as at a curious temporary obsession. Then one night he woke in the grip of excruciating pain. Unable to bear the darkness, he got out of bed to strike a light, and fell suddenly to the ground. He supposed that he had had a fit of some kind, and made an agonized attempt to find out how long he had remained unconscious. Was it a moment or an hour that he had lain upon the floor? A phrase remembered out of the history books of his boyhood flashed into his mind: "The falling sickness." Was it possible that he was epileptic? Terrified though he was, he derived a gloomy satisfaction from the thought that he might be suffering from a disorder so peculiar to men of genius.

The warning was too grave to be disregarded. He decided to consult Baines. With comforting daylight, however, he modified his intention of going to see him in the morning. He would wait until the afternoon to see how he felt. He owed Baines a call, and it might be possible to approach the subject of his health obliquely; to quote an imaginary case, and learn how far his fears were founded on reason. Then, if his fears were confirmed, he would tell Baines everything and put

himself unreservedly in his hands. If, on the contrary, he had been mistaken, he would say nothing, and the occasion would pass for a merely social visit.

The gloomy decency of Wimpole Street on a November afternoon depressed him. All the externals of the medical quarter of London, he thought, seemed to suggest a vested interest for the exploitation rather than the cure of disease. It was the home of a malign order prospering on secrecy and shame; an order that made not for enlightenment but for superstition, that suppressed knowledge for its own ends. It was impossible to believe that young and ardent men were to be found within the solid houses, with their heavy doors opening at intervals to furtive comings and goings, or in the silent, swiftly-rolling carriages. In imagination he saw sable plumes nodding above the parapets, and smelt the odor of death. At any moment the oppressive quiet of the place might be broken by a muffled scream of agony. Even the nurses, walking the pavement in their austere uniforms, seemed to be devoting their youth to point a ghastly moral to that other sisterhood in Regent Street.

He had by accident chosen a time when Baines was nearly always at home. The doctor seemed

pleased to see him, and certainly did not show by his manner that he supposed the poet's visit to be other than merely friendly. Lisle, on his part, was overcome with surprise at the interior of Baines' house. He had had so little to do with doctors that he did not know what a difference there is between the circumstances of the general practitioner and the consultant. There was none of the apparatus he expected; there were no bottles, there was not even the smell of drugs.

Baines took him up to a room on the first floor, already brilliantly lit with electric light, in striking contrast to the gloomy afternoon outside. At the door Lisle hesitated. Baines' face had brought back the memory of the evening when he had last seen him. All his mind seemed to be concentrated on his feet. The wide stretch of dark blue felt, shadowy and uncertain under that light, he must cross in order to reach a chair, terrified him. If only there had been a pattern to guide his footsteps by! To his imagination Baines' courteous smile as he stood waiting by the door became subtly ironical. He could have struck him in the face. He made his entrance with astonishing gaucherie for a man of his years and social aptitude.

Directly he was seated in a comfortable armchair

his spirits rose. The yielding felt which had been a pitfall was grateful to his feet. The warm quiet room had the effect of solidity, as if it had been hewn out of living rock, and yet of lightness. The pale gray walls were decorated with a few Japanese prints; there was a grand piano just inside the door, and a dainty tea service stood on a little table by the fire. From the well-filled low bookcase which ran along the unoccupied wall, the room might have been the study of a literary man. The only thing that gave a clue to the occupation of its owner was a microscope standing on a heavy table, littered with papers, by the window.

As if he were aware that his visitor was agitated, Baines talked continuously as he poured him out tea and handed him a plate of muffins from the fender. In looks and manner he was entirely unlike Lisle's conception of a doctor. At a casual glance one would have supposed him a smart man about town. He was tall, slim and well dressed, with short fair hair, rather carefully parted in the middle. His expression, dominated by his deeply set blue eyes, was one of intelligent good humor. He was quick and graceful in his movements.

Baines' manner to Lisle was subtly deferential, as if he recognized his position as a famous person.

He was wondering a little why the poet had come to see him, though his knowledge of the stratagems of the victims of nervous diseases made him not surprised at the visit. Men and women had come to see him, talked for an hour about music or horse-racing, and then suddenly burst into tears and poured out a lamentable tale. If Lisle had only known, Baines had already passed beyond a merely professional interest in him. If he was right in his diagnosis, nothing could be done, and he was nearly sure that he was right. In an ordinary case, beyond the large impersonal pity he felt for the hopeless, he would not have wasted thought or emotion in vain regret. But Fawcett's letter had aroused his curiosity. It was a social rather than a medical problem that now interested him, and he regarded Lisle not so much as a "case" or a celebrity as the husband of the woman he had never seen.

They talked about the man who had taken Baines to Lisle's house.

"Of course, he's very young," said the doctor, in response to some remark of Lisle's, "and I believe his absurdities are mainly verbal. I've seen a good deal of Webster in one way and another—he was an undergraduate of my college when I was demonstrating pathology—and, though he wouldn't

thank me for saying so, he leads a much more regular life than he would have you think. That seems to me a striking characteristic of the clever young men of to-day. Modern Byronism, Wertherism, or whatever you like to call it, tends more and more to dissipate itself in epigram and paradox."

"You would say, then, that the race has become shallower?"

"No, I shouldn't put it that way," said Baines, looking at the end of his cigarette; "it is merely a stage of evolution—not necessarily either up or down. Don't you think that every year our lives are getting less crudely physical? We seem to be gradually eliminating the body as a separate consideration, and so the kind of distinction that rests on bodily prowess—in any field—is less and less sought after."

"We certainly couldn't stand the lives that our fathers lived," said Lisle, with a nervous laugh, "though I suppose a good many of us have to bear the consequences of their more full-blooded—eccentricities."

"Probably," said Baines.

There was a little silence, and Lisle felt an insane impulse to turn round savagely and cry: "What are you driving at? What do you know?" He

controlled himself, and partly from a morbid instinct to talk round the subject he dreaded, and partly because he recognized that his surest protection lay in a seeming nonchalance, went on to say:

"I suppose your specialty brings you in contact with a good many people belonging to—to the more artistic professions?"

Baines said that the proportion was not so marked as might be supposed. Nervous subjects were to be found in every walk of life, and he spoke of some curious results he had arrived at in classifying his patients according to their occupations.

"You'll think," he said, with an apologetic laugh, "that I look upon my patients less as people to be cured than as cases to be studied—material, so to speak. For a man engaged chiefly in research work that is inevitable, but we all of us hope that our work will some day benefit humanity in general, so that it is not quite so selfish as it looks."

"You're very young to have made such a position," said Lisle, looking at him with new interest.

Baines laughed again, but rather sadly.

"You mustn't form an exaggerated idea of my abilities," he said. "I happen to have had the means to devote myself to the kind of work I'm interested

in. Here in England there is no endowment for science. I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that practically all the recent advances in medicine have been made by voluntary workers with private means. It is a great pity. Some of the most brilliant men I know are using up their energies in driving about the country at night to pay half-crown visits."

"But you would not refuse patients?"

"Oh, no!" said Baines. "That would be bad policy, even from a selfish point of view. I might lose, as I said, material."

Lisle frowned a little at his way of putting it, and said:

"Doesn't this view of your fellow creatures lead in time to an emotional hardening?"

"I don't think so. It gives one that detachment which is necessary—even for the comfort of one's patients."

Lisle remembered Father Fabian's comparison of the doctor with the confessor, and steadied by the tea and tobacco, began to take a perverse intellectual pleasure in running closer to the subject at the back of his mind.

"I suppose," he said with a slight jocularity that became him badly, "that you are able to diagnose

things at a glance? You have only to look at a man once to sign his death-warrant, so to speak?"

"It's hardly so simple as all that," said Baines, with a smile, as he lighted another cigarette. "Generally one needs the help of the patient or his friends. Sometimes one has to go further still. One is often puzzled."

"You sometimes make mistakes?" said Lisle with involuntary eagerness.

"In treatment?"

"No, in diagnosis."

"How do you mean?"

"For example, have you ever supposed that a man had something seriously the matter with him, and then it turned out that there was nothing at all?"

Baines shook his head with a grave smile.

"No, I don't think that is possible," he said.

Lisle waited for a moment, and then said, rather awkwardly:

"Supposing a man were really ill, and wanted to prevent your finding it out, could he succeed in taking you in?"

"He might. It's not very likely, though. The very efforts that a man makes to hide his infirmity are apt to give him away."

The last remark was made without intention, but Lisle flushed painfully and gripped the arms of his chair. Apparently, however, Baines was unaware of the effect of his words.

"Let me give you a light," he said, and went on in his level voice, "more particularly, of course, in mental cases."

"Ah, I forgot!" said Lisle, sitting back with a breath of relief. "Of course, the greater part of your work must necessarily be concerned with actual insanity."

"Wherever the line may be drawn," said Baines, laughing, as he sat down again. Lisle turned the conversation upon the supposed connection between genius and insanity, and his astonishing ignorance of the most elementary facts of brain function drew Baines into a superficial exposition of the subject in general. Like most artists, Lisle had hitherto been rather contemptuous of material science, but now he began to be interested. He forgot himself for the moment and asked eager questions, and Baines took pleasure in the unusual task of presenting absolutely new ideas to a brilliant intelligence. To illustrate some point he jumped up, and going to the table by the window, slipped the plug of a standard incandescent lamp into place and concentrated

the light upon the little mirror in the microscope.

"There," he said, arranging a chair for Lisle, "look at that specimen, and you will see what I mean. There would be none of those little spidery things in a normal brain."

Never having used a microscope before, Lisle was naturally clumsy, and Baines had to bend over him to guide his hand as he fumbled at the adjustment. The poet was beginning to feel an extraordinary liking for and confidence in the young doctor. The firm though gentle pressure of his hand, the agreeable murmur of his voice at his ear, encouraged him; and while he gave half his attention to the little moon-like circle of the microscopic field, he was already casting about in his mind for words to introduce the subject of his own health.

In rising from the instrument his eyes fell on the bookcase, which until now had been behind him, and traveling along the shelves, were suddenly arrested by the word *Epilepsy* in gold letters on the back of a thick, olive-green volume. All at once the whole meaning of the room became concentrated in that single word. He averted his eyes hastily, lest Baines should have noticed his attention, and spoke at random with a slight stammer. He was extri-

cated from his momentary embarrassment by the opening of the door.

The servant who had admitted him, a discreet woman, as if sobered by her master's confidences, brought in a card on a tray. Baines looked at the card, and said "Oh!" He explained that a man had come to see about some rearrangement of the electric light in the consulting-room down-stairs, adding hesitatingly:

"I have already had to put him off once."

Lisle recognized that this was the proper moment to take his leave, but the opportunity which presented itself to his mind was too good to be lost. He had to stiffen his neck to prevent himself glancing round at the thick, olive-green volume with *Epilepsy* on the back, and make an effort to conceal the eagerness with which he asked Baines to let him wait while he saw the workman.

"If I am not wasting your time?" he said, with an anxious smile.

"Not in the least," said Baines with genuine alacrity; "I shan't be five minutes." Lisle returned to his chair by the fire, and Baines, after pushing a box of cigars within his reach, left the room with the servant and ran lightly down the stairs.

For a few seconds Lisle sat staring fixedly into the fire. If he had been about to commit some serious breach of honor, he could not have been more agitated as he rose and approached the bookcase. He stood still and listened. He passed his hand twice along the row before it came to rest on the volume he needed. When he opened it he was immediately disappointed. Quick at taking in the sense of things, he saw at once that it was useless to him. It was an extremely technical treatise, in which a general knowledge of the disease was assumed. Still, there might be something to give him a clue. Afraid to take the book to his chair to examine it at leisure, he feverishly turned over the pages, reading here and there. But he could make nothing of it. Beyond a few histories of cases referred to by initials, and apparently taken from the wards of an insane asylum, the book was quite incomprehensible to a layman. A faint sound from below made him thrust the book hastily back into its place and return to his chair with a beating heart. In his preoccupation he had allowed his cigar to go out, and he smoked feverishly now to hasten its consumption.

Just as Baines reentered the room Lisle was taken with fear that he would notice that the book

had been moved. He began to talk with foolish emphasis about the quality of Baines' cigars, and elaborately made a note in his pocketbook of where he got them. It was as if in the doctor's absence he had been reading his private papers. But the title of the tantalizing work danced before his eyes. *Epilepsy, Epilepsy,* until at last he could bear it no longer, and almost involuntarily jerked out:

"Epilepsy? Do you get many cases of epilepsy?"

He held his breath and trembled through the apparently interminable interval before Baines answered carelessly:

"No; not ordinary straightforward cases."

"What do you mean by 'straightforward cases'?" said Lisle, in a choking voice.

Baines briefly explained the nature of the disease, and with an increasing glow of relief the poet began to understand that, so far as epilepsy was concerned, he had been frightening himself in vain. A few eager questions put to the now puzzled doctor convinced him. The reaction was so great that he had to put restraint upon himself to avoid crying out:

"Would you believe that I have been fool enough to fancy that I was epileptic?"

He shook with fearful joy to think how nar-

rowly he had escaped from an abject confession. Now that the one definite bugbear was removed, it was nothing that he was still no nearer to relief from his general anxiety. He was never further than at this moment from confiding in a doctor. Here was respite, anyhow; and for the future—Baines was always there when he was wanted.

Not content with the mere escape, and forgetting Baines' remark about the telltale value of contrary evidence, he began to brag about his physical soundness.

"If everybody had my health," he said, stretching out his legs luxuriously to the fire, "all the doctors would need to have private means. It is not because I have taken care of myself, either. What Stevenson called the philosophy of tin shoes and tepid milk has never appealed to me."

He parted from his host in high spirits, with repeated requests for the improvement of their acquaintance.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER an only moderately successful run of six weeks, *A King's Ransom* was taken off to give place to the comedy that had preceded it. The comparative failure of his play depressed Lisle less than he would have believed a few months ago, but he was sincerely concerned about Laura Dacre's future. He had the uneasy feeling that she might be waiting for a sign from him before looking out for another engagement. If she intended to remain on the stage she must not be allowed to prejudice her career on his account. His conversation with Father Fabian had influenced him more than he had known at the time, and he now recognized that this was a very good opportunity to try to put an end to an embarrassingly uncertain situation.

On a late November afternoon he made his way to Laura's flat in Kensington, with no very clear idea of what he should say or do, or even of what he wanted. The wan sunlight, the blue mist and the smell of rotting leaves in the quiet region of squares and gardens enhanced his mood of gentle melan-

choly. The sense of relief that followed his visit to Baines had only been temporary, but he had come to accept with almost resignation his rôle of a man marked by fate. It gave him distinction, and at present he suffered none of the humiliating disabilities of the sick man. His ignorance of the precise nature of his affliction made him invest it with romance. He now suspected that there was something wrong with his heart, and supposed that one day he would die suddenly in a moment of high emotion. It had seemed most fitting that he should go to see Laura on foot, and he walked slowly, taking particular note of the sky, because he might see it so seldom again. He felt kindly disposed toward all the world, gave sixpence to a crossing-sweeper, and touched the cheek of a baby in a perambulator, smiling to think how little the pretty Norland nurse suspected who the tall sad gentleman was.

He hoped that he would find Laura alone. During the last year she had taken a companion to live with her, as if with success she must be careful of her reputation. The red-brick building where she lived, with its green doors and window-frames, and brass fittings, had the look of refined prosperity. There was a school of needlework on the ground

floor. Lisle went up the stone stairs with some agitation. A new servant kept him waiting while she took in his name. Through the open door he heard Laura call out gladly, "Oh, yes!" and then the murmur of another voice. She was not alone.

She was, in fact, engaged with Miss Morris, her companion, in looking at patterns of dress materials. The pretty drawing-room, which indicated an engaging simplicity, a little disturbed by another influence, was littered with drapers' and milliners' boxes and fashion papers. As a final touch of homeliness, both ladies had been eating Fuller's peppermints.

"You are just come in time to be useful," said Laura, eying him, he thought, rather anxiously, as if she were wondering why he had come. He thought with remorse how he must have neglected her, for her to be surprised at his coming to see her. Embarrassment made him jocular: he tried on a hat, and chose extravagant combinations of color to suit his complexion. Miss Morris only, of the three, was quite composed, and waited with resigned gravity for the others to have done with their foolishness. Lisle did not like her. She was a woman of about thirty-five, rather handsome and prematurely gray, dressed in black with white collar and cuffs.

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She had the look of being surprised at nothing, and prepared for any emergency. She had traveled, had lived in the desert, and was understood to be a convert to Babism. She did not talk much, but had the habit of repeating the last words of a speaker with a far-away smile, as if she alone understood their inner significance.

Lisle saw that Laura was nervous and anxious to conciliate him. She was far from showing any resentment at his neglect. He could not get rid of the feeling that the two women had been "up to something," that he had taken them by surprise, and that they would have been glad now of an opportunity to confer. He felt very much the intrusive male. Presently Miss Morris sighed, and with an abrupt movement said that she was going out. Her glance from the door seemed to say "Remember!" and Laura, with amber silk in her hands, returned an appealing smile.

But immediately upon the closing of the door Laura dropped the silk and made a quick step forward. Lisle held her in his arms and kissed her with solemn tenderness. She cried a little. He was deeply moved: it was as if until now they had only played at love. After a moment she recovered, and

with a quick sigh freed herself, motioned him to a chair, and began to talk about the play.

"It was no use going on," she said apologetically; "you can't force people to like a thing. It was an artistic success, and we must be content with that."

"What more should we want?" he asked her.

"Nothing, of course," she replied, with a confused smile; "but that is not enough for managers."

"No," he said; "I'm afraid I've been keeping you back."

She winced and turned paler.

"I wish you wouldn't say things like that, Austin," she murmured. "But for you I should never have got my chance."

"We tried," he said, sitting with bent head, and speaking half to himself, "and we failed. But it was worth while. The world isn't ready—or we weren't strong enough; and if we together weren't strong enough, it's quite certain that the thing can't be done. Besides, though I regret nothing in the attempt we made, I'm beginning to see that in some things we were mistaken. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that what was right for me then is not right now. When I wrote for the theater you helped me wonderfully. I owe to you perhaps more than

anybody recognized. You at the same time inspired and interpreted me. You were an essential part in the actual conception: my plays could not only not have been acted, but could not have been written without you. But I see that in the future my expression will take another form." He waited, unable to find words delicate enough to tell her that she was no longer necessary to his artistic development and finally gave up the attempt, and with an awkward laugh concluded: "You can't devote your whole life to the interpretation of plays that managers haven't the courage to tackle. You must go on."

"Oh, I'm glad you are not going to write any more plays," she said agitatedly. "I didn't mean to tell you just yet. I hadn't courage. But I suppose now I had better do so. I have had an offer to go to America."

"To America!" he echoed blankly.

"I wanted to talk it over with you. I meant to the other evening at your house. But Father Fabian stayed. I thought you did not want to be bothered; I was a little angry."

There was a heavy silence, and then he said:

"So you have decided?"

"What was I to do? Burton was pressing me for an answer. It was a good offer."

"Burton?"

"Yes." She lowered her eyes and murmured in a frightened tone, "In *Here or Nowhere.*"

He laughed bitterly:

"The king is dead! long live the king!"

"That is nonsense, Austin," she said, with tears in her eyes. "It is a good part; the terms are better than anything I've had."

"Oh, you are quite right to look after yourself."

"You speak," she said, now actually crying, "as if it were a personal slight to you. And yet a moment ago you told me that I must go on, that you did not intend to write any more plays."

"But to America!" he said, as if he could hardly believe the words. "Then I have actually helped you to choose your dresses for the—trip," he added, looking round the room disgustedly.

"Those are not for the stage. I should have had to get them anyhow. I haven't a decent frock for the winter. I shall be away for less than a year. What is a year to people who care as we care?"

"Do you care, Laura?"

She turned away her head; her sincerity was un-

mistakable. Lisle had come prepared to talk calmly about her practical affairs, to suppress himself, to find out what she wished, to abide by her decision. But her announcement put all that out of his mind, and at this revelation of his power over her he began to lose his head. He forgot the imperfections that he had come to see in her during the last two years, her essential frivolity, her imitativeness, her occasional disconcerting vulgarity. He only knew that he could not let her go.

"Give it up, Laura," he said thickly.

"I can't," she said, shaking her head. "I signed the agreement yesterday."

"You can break it."

"But you don't understand," she said, eying him with astonishment over her handkerchief. "It would mean the forfeiture of a large sum of money."

The involuntary pride in the last words did not escape him. She had become conscious of her independent value.

"It is a great deal to ask," he said in a low tone, "but for my sake, Laura."

"I really can't afford it."

"That we two should come to talk about sordid questions of money!"

"Why sordid? Didn't we agree to do away with shams and to look facts in the face?"

"Ah, you don't understand, Laura," he said impatiently. "I want you to give up the whole thing; to share my life. I want you to take your place in my house. I can't live without you. I thought I could. You can't say that I have not tried. We made a mistake. It was a fine ideal, perfect comradeship, absolute freedom; we tried it faithfully, but we—I at least—find that I am not strong enough."

She looked at him curiously, with a half smile, and said:

"It is exactly—a wife—that you want? Somebody to keep house for you?"

He flushed and did not answer for a moment. Then, with a gesture of admission, he went on: "Yes; I wish I could make you my wife."

"It is not that," she said hastily, and flushing in her turn. "I can't give it up. People say that I am only at the beginning of my career, really, just at the threshold."

"You put your career before my love!"

She did not answer, and believing that she was weighing the matter, he continued:

"For the matter of that, I don't wish you to give

up the stage altogether, so long as we are not obliged to be separated."

"It is too late now," she said firmly. "I can't break this engagement, and you know I can't."

He was scandalized by her unexpected hardness.

"Now that I am a failure you desert me," he said gloomily.

"Don't be silly, Austin. You are not a failure. Everybody says that you are a great poet. Writing for the stage is—different. But plays are not everything, and as you said, you don't mean to write any more."

"You have been well tutored," he said bitterly. "Why don't you tell me that I have not had sufficient experience of stage technique?"

"Well, that is true, isn't it?" she said innocently, and then, seeing his face, cried out: "Oh, it is horrible to bandy words like this? You seem to want to quarrel about—about nothing. I shall be back by the summer. It will hardly make any difference to you. During the last six months I have only seen you as many times."

There was not an atom of reproach in the statement, but he felt it all the same, and looked confused.

"I don't wish to make excuses," he said; "but I

didn't want to interfere with your career, and you seemed contented to go on as we were. Anyhow, it is I that could not keep the conditions and I come to you now as a beggar."

"If you had asked me a year ago—"

"Oh, why keep referring to the past? I admit that I made many mistakes. If it is pride—isn't it enough that I—I come to you now?"

She hesitated, and he believed that she was wavering, and moved toward her, but she evaded him.

"No, Austin," she said sorrowfully; "it is too late. You did not let me finish my sentence. Even if it were not for this engagement, I would not now."

He waited for a moment, breathing heavily, and looking at her with somber eyes.

"Now we have the truth," he said; "you no longer love me, but you have not the courage to tell me so."

She looked at him with a grave smile, as one might look at a fretful child.

"That is not the question. Do you still love me?"

"Good God! Can you ask that?"

"Ssh! Austin; there's no need to be dramatic. Remember, I am an actress."

"Do you mean that I am pretending?"

"But I am not also a fool," she continued, without answering his question. "Like you, I shall never regret the past, but I am not going to sacrifice the present or the future for the sake of the past. It is for the sake of the past that you are asking me now. You mean generously, but I can't accept your generosity. You owe me absolutely nothing. I am quite happy. I suppose it sounds funny for me to talk about right and wrong, but it seems to me that the difference between then and now is for me just the difference between right and wrong. I believed in—us—then, but I don't believe in us now."

"Success has made you conventional."

She weighed it carefully, and said; "No, I believe as strongly as ever in the right of men and women to disregard public opinion and tiresome conventions; I'm much less bothered with morals than you are, for example. But I took a good deal for granted that I see now wants consideration. I won't generalize; everything depends on the particular case. Like most women, I suppose, I was biased by my affection. I thought of us two—and the rest. It never occurred to me that the rest was made up of individual men and women with feelings like our own."

"I understand," he said ironically. "I am the particular case that you don't believe in."

She waited for a moment, with a look of sorrow in her dark eyes.

"I hate to wound you, but it had better be said. You know, Austin, I never met—your wife. I won't say you complained about her, but I formed my idea of her entirely from you and some of your friends. I saw that you were unhappy, I thought you were hindered, and I imagined I could help. It never occurred to me at the time—I suppose it never does, or, if it does, one will not think—that perhaps I was hurting somebody who did not deserve it."

"It's no use talking about that, Laura," he said wearily. "What has been, has been. My wife will never come back to me."

"I'm not so sure," she said thoughtfully; "but, anyhow, I won't stand in the way again."

"This is all idle talk," he said irritably. "Granting all you say, we can't mend the past. Let us begin again. We've learned lessons, both of us."

She shook her head, and said with a smile:

"Besides, it would be so dreadfully *banal*. It was exactly domesticity that hindered you, that you wanted to get away from, and now—"

"God help me!" he cried. "What do I care about that? I've done with romance. I'm a broken man."

"Really, Austin," she said rather tartly, "I've no patience with you. You talk like a silly boy. Because your play hasn't been the success you expected—"

"How you harp on that!" he interrupted, with an impatient movement. "I'm not such a worm as to sit down and whine because the public prefers drivel to art. No, it is not that. I am ill."

"Ill?" she repeated, looking at him incredulously. He caught the look, and turned away with a muttered exclamation. She was immediately concerned, and fussed round him as only a loving woman can, but, as he saw, without suspecting more than a passing indisposition. He was already sorry that he had spoken.

"Why don't you see a doctor?" she asked. "Do you think you ought to be out? Would you like some wine, or anything?"

"Ah, you can't understand," he muttered; "it is nothing."

She bit her lip with perplexity.

"Really, Austin, you make me very uncomfortable," she said. "Why don't you take a holiday?"

"I can't afford to take a holiday."

"But you make plenty of money?"

"I have lived extravagantly. You know how I have lived. A crowd of parasites—not a real friend among them."

"Well, if you are short of money isn't it better that I should take all the engagements I can?"

"How could I take money from you?"

"That is nonsense. You know what is mine is yours."

"Yes, that is it," he said, turning abruptly. "You will do anything for me except live with me. It is I myself that you can not tolerate. I suppose you have met somebody else; you have formed other ties."

"If you were well you would not talk like that, Austin," she said, with quivering lips.

"At least you are acting under the influence of another person."

"No, I decided on my own account. It is better."

He took up his hat.

"This is the end, then?"

"Dear," she said, coming to him, "why should we quarrel? You make me so unhappy."

"Never mind, Laura," he said indulgently. "You have the right to make your own life. But I never

thought it would come to a question of rights between us."

She allowed him the last unjust word, and she was so far from comprehending the final and tragical aspect that the situation bore for him, that she could think of nothing better to say than to press him to stay to tea. He refused, however, and they parted with a handclasp.

CHAPTER VIII

ON a bright morning toward the end of November, Margaret sat in her workshop reading the twenty-fourth chapter of *Pickwick* aloud to her girls. Two of them were at a long table engaged in different stages of leather work, and the third, Lizzie Matthews—the girl who had had a baby—stood behind Margaret brushing out her thick reddish hair. This privilege had been the cause of more than one quarrel between Margaret's assistants, until it was arranged that they should take it in turns. Lizzie was a girl of about Margaret's height and build and color, but younger and softer, and her brown eyes retained the unquenchable light of motherhood, though her baby had died when it was but three months old. The two girls at the table were Phœbe Dando and Victoria Price. Phœbe, the consumptive, who was only eighteen, had fair hair, mild blue eyes with porcelain whites, and a complexion of milk and roses; while Victoria, who was a year older than Margaret, was a big-limbed,

black-maned, black-browed young woman, with Welsh ancestry, evident in the vivid color on her high cheek-bones and the faint down on her rather scornful upper lip.

The chief outward effect of Margaret's influence on the girls was in their increased femininity. They still spoke with the rough local accent and occasionally made use of coarse expressions, but they were more emphatically women than if they had been in domestic service, or working in the fields, or even married to men of their own class. Contact with Margaret had made them, not like her, but more like themselves. Her influence had been preservative rather than exemplary, and enabled them to keep their natural dignity and pride of sex more intact than is usual with girls of their class in the rural districts of England. They had become at the same time simpler and richer; only slightly less ignorant than their village companions, they seemed less detached from preceding generations.

The workshop was a pleasant room, with a small-paned window running the whole length of the sunny side. The walls had been lined with match-boarding, but the beams and rafters of the roof were exposed. The door at one end was approached from the outside by a flight of stone steps,

and at the other end a door in the wooden partition communicated with Mr. Dixon's now seldom used photographic dark-room. Under the long window there was a bench littered with skins, paper stencils, cutting tools and pots of color; and besides other implements of the craft, such as a screw press and a treadle sewing-machine, the workshop contained a piano, a writing-table, two easy chairs and a small stretcher bed covered with blue serge for Phœbe Dando to lie down upon when she was not well enough to work. In spite of the knives and punches, and the bareness of the walls, the room had the indefinable character of a place used by women only. The window was open to a balmy air after three days' wind and rain which had ruined the woods and deepened the brook's light murmur to a roaring audible even here. Out in the low-lying green meadows wide lakes reflected fleecy white clouds in a blue sky. Two of the poplars that surrounded the Dixons' field had come down, and their broken ends gleamed in the sunlight with a startling pallor that gave to the whole visible landscape a look of rawness and unquiet, though the morning was very still, and distant objects had a strange looming quality in the moist air. On the bench by the window there stood a large

earthen pitcher of chrysanthemums with a memory of the late storm in their twisted petals, as their color recalled the accumulated warmth and richness of a departed summer.

Margaret finished the chapter, and laying down the book, abandoned herself to the charm of Lizzie's fingers and her own reflections. She had not spoken to Fawcett again since their meeting at the vicarage. In the interval Charles Dixon had called upon him and not only satisfied himself that the young engineer was a gentleman, but learned that, though not a keen card-player, he was able to take a hand at bridge; and, moreover, that he was interested in his own neglected hobby of photography. When Fawcett returned his call, Margaret happened not to be at home.

For a few minutes the only sound was the click and thud of Victoria's hammer as she punched out a pattern in relief upon the wet leather, and when Margaret spoke, the sound as much as the meaning of her words came with a shock to the girls.

"How do you think you would get on if I went away for six months?"

Phœbe said, "Oh, Miss Margaret!" in her light voice, and Lizzie let fall the heavy tresses that

she had begun to arrange; but Victoria deliberately struck another blow, put down the hammer and said:

"We shouldn't get on at all."

"Don't be a baby, Victoria," said Margaret; "you know nearly as much about the work as I do by this time."

"And a sheep-dog knows as much as his master," said Victoria composedly.

It would be idle to pretend that Margaret was not pleased by their devotion, but she made a sincere attempt to find out how far they were really dependent upon her.

"What do you say, Lizzie?" she asked, trying to look up into the girl's face over her own head.

"If you want to go away, Miss Margaret," said Lizzie in her slow and curiously resigned voice, "it would be best to shut up the workshop until you come back."

"I didn't say I wanted to go away."

"Then us needn't shut up the shop," said Victoria, picking up her hammer.

"Well, but look here," said Margaret rather impatiently, "what if anything happened to me? Supposing I died?"

"Oh, don't 'ee, miss!" moaned Phœbe. Victoria had resumed her tapping as if the conversation had ceased to be practical.

"Don't be alarmed, I am not going to die just yet," said Margaret. "Victoria, please pay attention to me. This really is a matter that ought to be talked about. I had no idea you were quite so hapless. It is my fault, I suppose, for saving you the trouble of thinking. In the future we shall have to have a different arrangement. You—Lizzie and Victoria—must take it in turns to keep the accounts and book the orders; Phœbe had better wait for a bit, because—"

A sharp knock at the door interrupted her. In answer to Margaret's clear-toned "Come in!" Fawcett entered the room, carrying a hand-camera.

"Oh!" he said, momentarily disconcerted by the hasty conclusion of Margaret's toilet. The three girls giggled, and this helped Margaret to say, with composure:

"Good morning, Mr. Fawcett."

"Good morning," he said, and confirmed her idea of his good taste by coming forward without hesitation.

"Mr. Dixon very kindly gave me leave to use his dark-room," he said. "I expect he told you."

"No, he didn't tell me," said Margaret.

"I'm so sorry to have disturbed you," said Fawcett, turning away. "I'll come again when you are not busy."

"I didn't mean that, of course," said Margaret, rising, with her hands at her head; "but if I had known you were coming, I would have had the dark-room tidied. It is in a dreadful state."

She opened the door, and he followed her in without further apology. The light from the workshop enabled him to see that Margaret had not exaggerated the dark-room's disorder. The floor was littered with the wrappings of plate-boxes, and unlabeled bottles and encrusted measures stood on the little shelf beside the sink, over which a double ruby window in the thickness of the wall enabled the place to be used by daylight or artificial illumination.

"Oh, look at that," cried Fawcett, bending over a chemical balance as if it had been a wounded bird. The tiny weights were scattered about and the crystals of some salt had effloresced upon the glass pan and on the green baize of the base-board.

Margaret was amused.

"I warned you that my brother wasn't a tidy man," she said.

"Tidy!" said Fawcett in a tone of disgust; and

then, suddenly remembering that she might think him rude to her brother, continued: "Forgive me —but this is professional. A piece of machinery is sacred to me."

He lifted off the glass cover of the instrument, and with a pair of forceps picked up the weights and wiped them on his handkerchief, which he also used as a duster. Margaret admired the firm though delicate movements of his rather clumsy-looking fingers. She wondered if such a man could ever take the same passionate interest in his fellow creatures that he did in a piece of mechanism. When he had cleaned the balance he tested it, waiting until the long needle came to rest.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said, with a reflective smile, proving that he had not, as she at first imagined, forgotten her presence. Her keen perception of his character made her feel that he had rather complimented her than otherwise by keeping her waiting without apology. He had taken her for granted. Still, she was not going to pretend that mere equipoise had the same charm for her that it had for him. The curious appearance of the outside world through ruby glass was far more fascinating to her, and she said so. He laughed and covered up the balance.

"I like to know where I am before I begin," he said lightly; "and a good pair of scales is a luxury I don't get every day."

He looked round the dark-room, examined a bottle or two, and tried the water-tap and found that it ran free. He was obviously waiting for her to go.

"If I may shut myself in here for ten minutes or so?" he said at length.

"As long as you like," said Margaret, and returned to the workshop.

She found the interval rather trying. The girls were inclined to be frivolous, and wanted her to ask Fawcett to take a picture of them at work. Margaret shook her head, and made an attempt to resume her interrupted lecture; but finding that she spoke to inattentive ears, gave it up, and went on with a design she was making. She quite sincerely hoped that Fawcett would not use the dark-room often during her working hours.

He took no longer than he had promised, and presently unbolted the door, and with wet fingers held up a film negative to the light, examining it critically.

"Generally I do my developing in the evening," he said, as if in answer to her thoughts, "but I

wanted to make sure that I had got my exposure right. I've been taking some pictures of the brook in flood, and it will probably go down very quickly, so I may not have another chance. It's a tricky subject, the foam is so white. Everything else looks black beside it."

Margaret got up to look at the negative, which conveyed very little to her.

"Is it all right?" she said, handing it back to him.

"I can improve on it—now I know where I am."

She asked him if he took many photographs, and he said:

"Oh, I don't pretend to make an art of it, but I find it useful in my work. Sometimes it saves me a lot of writing, and I like to keep a record of anything interesting that I come across. Have you been down to look at the stream?"

"Not yet."

"Oh, you ought to go. The weir is an extraordinary sight. As an illustration of how easily a man may trip up through not seeing things—if this hadn't happened we might have got into serious difficulties over the piers of the viaduct where it crosses the bed of the stream. Now we shall know what precautions to take to provide for a sudden rush of water. This will make some difference in

the cost of the section, and these photographs will come in handy in making my report to the company."

He put the negative to wash, and asked if he might look at the work the girls were doing. His immediate grasp of the little technical difficulties that had worried Margaret for weeks humbled her, for she felt that, against her will, she was jealously watching him for quite another reason. The girls were very conscious of the presence of a good-looking young man, and Victoria Price, in spite of her haughtiness, was frankly inclined to be flirtatious. The air was electric with quickened breathing and uncertain voices ready to break down into giggling at any moment. It was a severe test for any man, but Margaret would have been disappointed if Fawcett had been shy or self-conscious. He moved about this stronghold of women without the least trace of embarrassment, keenly interested in the work, but not to the exclusion of the workers. He looked the girls frankly in the eyes when he spoke to them, and when Victoria asked if she should make him a bacca-pouch he laughed, and said it would be much too ladylike for his use.

Directly he had left the workshop the girls began to talk about him. As was natural in a small vil-

lage, they had a surprisingly intimate knowledge of his affairs.

"Mrs. Andrews told un to go the day after he come," said Lizzie; "but he only laughed at she."

"Why was that?" said Margaret, against her judgment.

"He gave her up sauce 'cos she was ten minutes late with his breakfast, but now she says she do love him as if he was her own son. He car's up the water for his own bath, and takes off his boots in the kitchen."

"I wouldn't love he—not like a son," murmured Victoria.

"He took on our Tom to carry the chain for him," said Phœbe. "Our Tom says the gaffer dursn't speak for fear of him, and he used to curse awful to Mr. Thompson."

The "gaffer" was the foreman of navvies, and Mr. Thompson was the late engineer of the section, a mild elderly man.

"I should like to see the chap as would meddle with his young woman," said Victoria abstractedly.

"How d'you know he's got one?" asked Phœbe.

"Pooh!" said Victoria. "A man can't look at apples with a straight face unless he's got an orchard of his own."

"He goes down to the club-room every Saturday night to play draughts and dominoes with the men," said Lizzie. "Mr. Thompson never came nigh."

"Much better ask me to go for a walk with him," said Victoria.

Margaret knew that Victoria was the last girl in the world to permit male attentions until she had made up her mind to marry—when the man she chose would find it hard to resist her—but she thought it time to say:

"Now, girls, you've talked enough nonsense, and we've wasted nearly the whole morning."

For the remaining half-hour they talked over Margaret's proposal that the girls should take turns in the management of the workshop. She derived a moral satisfaction from the feeling that she really was doing something practical toward making them independent of her. Not that she believed it would ever become necessary. At this interval from her first vivid impression of Fawcett she had begun to think herself rather vain and foolish in supposing that there could be any danger in their friendship. She was quite frank with herself; she liked him, and wanted to know him better. Probably, she thought, Victoria was right in surmising that he already had a young woman.

CHAPTER IX

IN precisely what generation the Dixon family had lost its hold upon reality and become a fantastic survival would be difficult to determine. Their house indicated a confusion of ideas that went deeper than esthetics—if anything could. Hardly a single article it contained was not good in itself, but the general effect was that of half-hearted vulgarity. The older furniture and the two or three dark oil-paintings of the "supposed to be valuable" school represented the real tastes of an order that justified its existence by a definite and dignified attitude to life—a real middle-class. The modern things, including most of the purely decorative objects, such as photograph-frames and china, were the spoil of so many blind clutches at the prevailing mode. They were disposed among the heavier survivals with a timidity which in the result made both aggressive.

Mrs. Dixon was a small dark woman, with rather pinched features and a gentle manner. Naturally kind, she ordered her house upon admirable

traditions, cruelly inadequate to the other people who lived in it. She was not an inconsiderate mistress, but she thought and spoke of servants as a class. She had two children, a boy nearly fourteen, now at a private school in Somersetshire, and a girl of ten in the care of a daily governess. When Margaret first came to live with the Dixons, she offered to teach Mary; but Mrs. Dixon, though grateful for the proposal, was literally afraid to accept it. She liked Margaret, but she had the obscure jealousy of the competent woman which seems to be characteristic of women who are not sure of themselves. Consequently Margaret had to look on helplessly at the conversion of a naturally attractive child into a little prig. Mary, on her part, with the uncanny logic of childhood, translated her mother's vague fear of Margaret into the supposition that she was not quite a proper person.

Mrs. Dixon was extraordinarily well read in modern novels, with a preference for works dealing with "deep" subjects, such as religious controversy and the occult. She once confided to Margaret that Charles reminded her of the strong silent man of one of her favorite authors. She had a genuine horror of the "smart set," which was not,

as is usually the case, based on envy. Distrusting her own observation, and taking her ideas ready-made out of books, under her quiet exterior she lived in a world of the wildest assumptions about her fellow creatures, which, however, were only betrayed when her prejudices were attacked.

Mrs. Hobday, the wife of the new tenant of Compton Lodge, presented to her imagination all the worst characteristics of the nouveaux riches. She was handsome, good-natured, vulgar and wealthy. After the first exchange of formal calls the two ladies did not come frequently in contact until Mrs. Hobday was put on the committee of the Cottage Hospital, to which Mrs. Dixon also belonged. An application by the new matron, a good-looking, clever and highly-trained but perhaps not very tactful young woman, for extra help put them on different sides. There was a meeting, at which Mrs. Wakeling supported Mrs. Hobday and the matron, and the matter ended by Mrs. Hobday undertaking to pay a charwoman's wages out of her own pocket.

The same evening Fawcett came up to the Dixons' after dinner to play bridge. Margaret had already observed that he and Mrs. Dixon did not, as

the saying is, "get on" together, but supposed that her sister-in-law's coldness was merely due to Fawcett's connection with the railway. After the formal protest required by her principles she would probably become friendly enough. Indeed, almost her first words this evening were to ask Fawcett to dine with them on Christmas day, now three weeks distant. The invitation was given a little self-consciously, as if she were insisting on her magnanimity to a natual enemy. Fawcett said that he should have been delighted, but that he was already engaged to the Hobdays. Mrs. Dixon gave a weak little smile, and murmured her regret, and the momentary awkwardness would have passed off easily enough if Charles, whose humor was generally expressed in making the wrong jokes to the wrong people, had not said:

"Hullo, Polly, that's one to your rival," a remark of course quite incomprehensible to the visitor.

As they sat down to cards, Margaret knew that Mrs. Dixon was feeling a very keen sense of Mrs. Hobday as one of the direct consequences of the railway. Fawcett, however, seemed to be quite unaware that he stood for a grievance with his hostess, and as the chances of the game and his own

good play brought them together in luck, it seemed likely that he would win her good opinion on his own merits. To keep her in a good humor, whenever they were in opposition, Margaret played worse even than usual, and this gave Charles an opportunity to make witty remarks about her absent-mindedness. They rose for refreshments in a little outburst of amiable chatter.

"Have a little drop of the cratur, Fawcett?" said Charles, who seldom called things by their proper names out of business hours. Fawcett said that he would, and the two men lighted their pipes and drew their chairs up to the fire, while Margaret, at Charles' request, played them a tune. Mrs. Dixon, now a little sleepy, took up some needlework, consisting of interminable crimson spiders on a white sheet, intended, she explained, for a bedspread; and Charles talked about politics with sound good sense upon premises which were the merest moonshine.

Margaret finished her tune with the feeling that everything was going splendidly, and Mrs. Dixon, as if to emphasize her good will, began to ask Fawcett questions about the progress of the railway.

"We had a little accident this afternoon," he said; "one of the pointsmen got his foot crushed and

we had to take him to the hospital." And then, pursued by a malign fate, he went on to talk in a complimentary way about the management of that institution.

"You are very lucky to get a nurse like that," he said; "most country places have to put up with the failures of the profession. She keeps everything spotlessly clean and ready for any emergency; Jones couldn't have been more smartly attended to in the accident ward of a London hospital. I can't think how she manages with only one assistant."

Margaret had not the courage to turn the subject, and Charles frankly giggled.

"Excessive smartness has its disadvantages," said Mrs. Dixon coldly, "and personally I am inclined to believe that we should get on better with a sensible middle-aged woman less highly trained, but willing to obey orders and with a proper respect for her employers."

To illustrate her meaning she quoted a story she had read in a newspaper discussion on the relative virtues of the old and new styles of sick nurse; about a lady, seriously ill, who woke up to find her nurse sitting on the end of the bed smoking a cigarette. When she spoke, the nurse dropped her

cigarette and exclaimed, "Good gracious, how you startled me! I thought you were dead!"

Fawcett was impressed, but not in the way she intended.

"What an admirable story," he said. "It puts the difference between the amateur and the professional in a nutshell."

Mrs. Dixon dropped her sewing and stared at him.

"What, Mr. Fawcett! Smoke a cigarette in the presence of the dead!" she cried.

"Oh, I expect the cigarette is only an embellishment," he said. "The real point of the story is that when there is nothing further to be done, the good nurse doesn't waste her energies in fussing round. It is always the amateur who thinks about sentimental proprieties."

Margaret saw that his view of the subject was hopelessly over her sister-in-law's head, and tried to talk about something else; but Fawcett, who was really pleased with the illustration and quite ignorant of the personal grievance that had prompted Mrs. Dixon to quote it, let his tongue run away with him. The story, he said, showed the mass of sentimental humbug and superstition that must

be cleared away before people woke up to their real duties. There were parallels to the sick lady in the government, in the army, in the education department, in every trade and profession throughout the country, including his own. Charles, who liked teasing his wife, joined in, until the poor confused lady was driven to the admission that she would rather be killed by the incompetence of a "decent motherly body" than cured by the skill of a trained nurse who smoked cigarettes when her attentions were not required. This, of course, made her an easy prey to Charles, who chaffed her until she finally burst into tears.

"I think you men are brutal," she said, rising hastily; "and it only proves what I say. This craze for so-called progress is destroying every principle."

Fawcett, who had imagined that she shared his enjoyment of an interesting argument, turned brick-red and stared in horror. Now that the mischief was done, Charles was immediately penitent.

"Don't be silly, Polly," he said, putting his arm round her; "we were only chaffing."

"Then I think it is abominable to joke about death," she sobbed.

"I'm sure Fawcett didn't mean that," said Charles; "did you?"

"No, of course not," said Fawcett rather shortly. Still ignorant of the real cause of Mrs. Dixon's annoyance, he felt mystified and angry. Controlling herself, Mrs. Dixon consented to sit down again, and Margaret, who had taken no part in the argument, heroically asked Fawcett how his photographs had turned out. For the remaining quarter of an hour he and Charles made a dismal attempt to talk about focal-plane shutters as if nothing had happened. When the engineer took his leave, Mrs. Dixon gave him her hand with a plaintive smile, as if assuring him that she would try to bear his manners.

Indeed, as Margaret saw, she was less angry with him than she was with Nurse Wynne and Mrs. Hobday. Unfortunately, as soon as he had come back from letting Fawcett out, Charles, who sometimes played at being head of the house, thought it necessary to reprove his wife for her want of self-control before their guest.

"He's a bit rough," he said, pouring himself out some more whisky, "but in these days one can't afford to be too particular, and he does come of

quite a good family. Knocking about the world," he added, pulling himself up, glass in hand, and speaking as out of a wide experience of camp and field, "rubs some of the polish off. What do you say, Margaret?"

Margaret declined to give an opinion, and Mrs. Dixon said quietly:

"It is not his roughness I object to, but his principles. I suppose it is true that a man may be known by the company he keeps."

"Well, he couldn't be expected to know that Mrs. Hobday was your *bête noire,*" said Charles, popping a sandwich into his mouth.

"I am not conscious of any personal dislike to Mrs. Hobday. I don't really know her. A man with right principles wouldn't allow himself to get mixed up with a set that behaves in defiance of every law of God and man."

"That's a bit strong," said Charles; "eh, Margaret?"

"Oh, I don't think we do any good by talking about it," said Margaret. "I'm going to bed."

"Oh, I don't suppose it matters to you," said Mrs. Dixon, who had picked up her sewing as if she were settled there for the night; "your ways are not

our ways. I dare say in Bohemian circles in London it is quite a common practise to insult a lady in her own drawing-room. I should have thought, however, that your own experience would have opened your eyes to the consequences of a lack of principle."

Margaret, who knew that she did not really mean to be ill-natured, let the remark pass in silence, but Charles, who wanted to go to bed, and was getting cross, said:

"Well, I don't see what all this has got to do with the question whether nurses should smoke cigarettes."

"It's all part of the same thing," said Mrs. Dixon, with a vague movement of her hand.

"The fact of the matter is," said Charles, putting down his glass with the air of one clenching the subject, "Nurse Wynne is too good-looking."

"Well," said Mrs. Dixon, threading her needle, with a patient smile, "I've no doubt you'll say I'm censorious, but was it absolutely necessary for Mr. Fawcett to go to the hospital?"

"Upon my word, isn't that just like a woman?" said Charles, reddening a little, to Margaret's amusement.

"You may laugh at me now," said Mrs. Dixon,

"but you mark my words, there'll be a scandal some of these days, and then you'll all turn round on me and the other members of the committee, and say we ought to have been more careful about the sort of person we employed."

This was really too much for Margaret's gravity, and she said:

"Perhaps you think that Mr. Fawcett got up the accident on purpose?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Mrs. Dixon calmly.

CHAPTER X

IN spite of her sentimental regret for the spoiling of the countryside, Margaret found herself taking a keen interest in the progress of the railway. At first she looked on at the various activities, the preliminary breaking of the ground by the steam-navvy, the periodical excitement of blasting, the apparently wanton mischief of the "tip"—occasionally made more piquant by a wagon crashing over—with the detached amusement that women so often feel for the serious occupation of men. She called the steam-navvy "Moloch," because of his bulk and iron disregard for the tender turf he grubbed up and engorged, but her particular joy was the little locomotive named "Willie," which all day ran to and fro with a line of wagons from "Moloch" to the growing embankment, where they were hitched on singly to the swaggering tip-horses.

On account of his egregious air of the industrious apprentice, she rechristened him "Smiles." He

seemed always to be uttering platitudes about the dignity of labor and the importance of time. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do-hoo-hoo!" he tootled when he started off with a train of loaded wagons, and he took the rickety points with the self-conscious air of one remembering "There is a tide in the affairs of men." Whenever Margaret found him simmering complacently by the bridge she wanted to pat his iron skin, and she tried to think of some equivalent for the carrot or the lump of sugar with which one rewards a good pony. School children loved him, and called him "dear li'l Willie." His attendants were never tired of grooming him and singing his praises. "Oil 'is bearin's and keep an eye on 'is gages," said the driver to Margaret one day, "and a child could drive 'im." Margaret had her doubts of his perfect probity, and once when he disappeared for three whole days from Compton she felt convinced that he was up to no good. Walking in a distant lane, crossed by the temporary line, she found the gates closed. She looked across the valley, and there was "Smiles" racketing down the slope in sheer pride of metal. The up-grade subdued him, and he passed her at the level-crossing emitting copy-book sentiments about

the daily round, the common task. A few hours later she saw him being stabled for the night in his virtuous shed, and he had to her imagination the irresistible air of saying, "Don't tell."

But underneath all this indulgent amusement and play of fancy Margaret felt the growing sense of something real and important. The line was something more than a mere convenience to save busy people half an hour in their journey between London and South Wales. It stood for a principle which alternately attracted and repelled her: the principle of going through with things to a desired end, regardless of the consequences. If she had to make a railway, she thought, she would be tempted to do it on a series of compromises; going round this corner for the look of things, sparing that group of poplars for old sake's sake, avoiding an ivied wall because somebody loved it. It would, she admitted, be a very bad railway at the finish; and it was more than doubtful whether her hesitating touch would not in the result profane the landscape more certainly than if she had kept severely to her purpose, and left beauty and sentiment to take care of themselves.

With her mind full of these thoughts, she met Fawcett by the cutting on the afternoon of the day

following his unfortunate encounter with Mrs. Dixon. He lifted his cap, and looked at her with a rueful shrug of his broad shoulders. Margaret laughed; it was no use to pretend that she did not understand the action. He turned and walked with her, glancing at her in frank admiration. She was dressed in gray, with silvery fur and muff, and a knot of violets in her hat brought out the full value of her bright hair. After a morning's rain there was frost in the air, the moist ground was already crisping under foot, and movement had brightened her eyes and quickened her blood so that her cheeks glowed with health and vigor.

"I'm afraid I made rather a mess of it last night," said Fawcett presently.

"Yes, you did," she said emphatically, having her own grievance in the idea that he had impressed her sister-in-law unfavorably.

"Oh, well," he said, "it simply isn't worth while if one has to talk all the time in undertones and polite acquiescences. But you didn't think I was rude, did you?"

"No, I didn't," she replied with a slight stress on the pronoun.

"Then it doesn't matter very much," he said simply.

"All the same," she said, "you really must learn to spare the weak."

"I was stupid not to see that I was giving offense. I'm more used to talking to men—though I don't remember that I spoke violently."

"You didn't; but you ought to have seen that the whole subject was impossible."

"I suppose so," he admitted; "but I get impatient with all this silly outcry against people who are trying to do real things."

"Yes, I know what you mean. But one has to compromise. You can't have a whole world made to please you, and the people who want to talk about real things must consider the prejudices of others."

"You don't go out much?" he asked her.

For the moment, she did not see the bearing of his question; when she did, she colored slightly, but answered frankly:

"No, except to the Wakelings' and sometimes to the Hobdays'."

He laughed and said:

"I like Mrs. Hobday."

"So do I," she said. They walked in silence for a few steps, and then she continued, with a trace of embarrassment:

"You see, I am not living in my own house, and

I really owe them a great deal. They took me in. That's not an easy thing for one woman to do for another—particularly her husband's sister. I hope last night won't put you off coming to see us. My brother likes you."

They had reached the eastern end of the cutting, where it ran out upon the level, and by common consent leaned upon the wire fence to watch the men at work. It was now nearly four o'clock, and the clear sky was deepening to a coppery sunset. Just across the line and looking all the more peaceful for this crude evidence of human labor, there was an old gray farmhouse, with many gables and chimneys of that beautiful form known as the "Gloucestershire chimney," produced by simply turning the slender square shaft diamondwise upon its base, and surrounded by tall poplars. Down in the valley a cold gray mist was rising from the hidden stream. Hard by them the steam-navvy had ceased working for the day, and the steel tusks of the hopper rested upon the broken soil as if in the act of crunching. A jet of escaping steam rose violet against the sky. The soil hereabouts was fat and red, and there was an almost brutal contrast between the cutting and the frosty-green undisturbed grass on either side. Margaret thought that the

place looked like a battle-field; the boundary wall of the farm, broken to give passage to the line, looked as if it had suffered bombardment. Pools of water like blood lay in hollows of the ground, and the abandoned tools of workmen shone like weapons of war. Beyond the bridge, which barred the sunset, a gang of men were gathered in one spot as if they were about some conspiracy. The thump and jingle of their implements and the murmur of their voices sounded clear in the frosty air.

"It's a negative life you're leading," said Fawcett suddenly. "You are not following an impulse. You have the day to get through, and so you make pretty things in leather."

"What ought I to be doing, then?" she asked, rubbing her chin on her muff.

"You might—" he began, but could not finish the sentence, because he was thinking of her obvious destiny as the mate of a man. She, with her wide brow, clear eyes and warm lips, her sound health, her admirable body, was never meant for celibacy. She was meant to be the mother of strong sons, the good comrade calling out a man's best powers at his work, and enriching his leisure with all the gifts of her calm intelligence and ready sympathy.

"Life ought to be something better than a series of efforts to escape boredom," he said aloud. "It is a waste of power. You are not fulfilling yourself."

She reminded him of what she was doing for the girls who worked with her, and he admitted that that was not a wasted effort, but said:

"Isn't any deliberate helping of other people a confession of personal failure?"

"It's hardly generous to remind me of that, is it?" she said in a low voice, and looking at him with slightly raised eyebrows.

He colored up and muttered: "Forgive me for being so clumsy."

He was saved from further embarrassment by the advent of "Willie" trundling back from the tip with his last file of empty wagons for the day. Red-stained men uncoupled the wagons, and with crowbars pushed and lugged them into place, beside "Moloch," ready for filling on the morrow. "Willie" stood by, simmering complacently with his ridiculous air of smug self-satisfaction.

"Little prig!" said Margaret flinging a bit of bark from the post she leaned upon at the engine; "you can almost hear him saying, 'Now I lay me down to sleep.'"

Fawcett laughed, and said:

"Yes, but there's always something pathetic to me about a locomotive, as if it knew what a clumsy and imperfect thing it is, and reproached us for our stupidity in making it so. It represents brute force struggling for expression."

"Dear me," said Margaret; "I thought you considered a steam-engine the most perfect thing in the world?"

"Taking everything into consideration, it's the best we can do for the moment; but we shall go on improving—simplifying."

Margaret repeated the last word in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, it comes to that," said Fawcett absently. "You see, the whole problem is how to translate the energy which is locked up in the universe into a usable form. Presently we shall hit upon some 'open sesame' which will practically do away with machinery altogether. Every carriage will be provided with a little converter, which you could put in your pocket, to pick up energy from the ground and turn it into a force that will make the wheels go round. Till then"—he pointed to the cutting—"railways and steam-engines and motor-cars and all the other clumsy boxes of tricks."

He came out of his reverie, and they walked slowly back toward the bridge. Margaret was interested and asked him a question or two to keep him to the subject of his profession.

"We are getting humbler," he said. "We are beginning to see that man's business is less to create than to liberate. Every day we get more respect for the characters of the things we use; there is more in them than we thought. What the ancients tried to do by magic we must try to do by patient investigation. Until lately we have thought of things too much as materials; now we are beginning to admit them into our councils as brothers. As we put more and more confidence in them we shall use them not only more efficiently, but more beautifully."

"Then ugliness is a sort of protest against ill-treatment?"

"Certainly it is," he said, pleased with her simile. "Most of our buildings are ugly because we violate the materials of which they are made; we force them to do things against their genius. Accept the stoniness of stone, the steeliness of steel, and they will begin to respond, to give up their secrets. There's a beauty in concrete, if we only understood its temperament. I remember reading somewhere

in Ruskin about the lesson to engineers in a plant of feathery grass; the admirable correlation of energy to mass, the perfect gradation in the different joints of the stem. It is the visible sketch of an impulse fading away by exquisite degrees to the last filaments. The earlier forms of plants look clumsy, as if they had not become fully conscious of their gift of life. The individual parts are unnecessarily thick and strong; they don't seem to make the most of themselves. So we still use our materials timidly though arbitrarily, because we don't know how far they can be educated, how much we can get out of them. We've got to do for the inanimate world what we are supposed to be doing for the black races. But in order to reach a more intelligent mastery of energy and materials we must make experiments, and therefore sentimental protests against mechanical invention seem to me to be directed against the very Golden Age that the speakers pretend to want restored."

"I see what you mean," said Margaret; "but meanwhile," she looked at the cutting, "something is being spoiled."

"Something was spoiled when you grew out of childhood, but—" his eyes rested on her, and he did not finish the sentence. "Something is being spoiled

every moment," he continued. "If you plant a rose-tree your spade destroys a dozen things of beauty. So long as beauty is the result of a thing fulfilling itself to the best of its powers it is good, but the moment you have to preserve a form of beauty for old sake's sake, to build round it a ring fence of sentimental conventions, of 'Thou shalt nots,' it is better done away with."

"Ah, well," she said, "but you mustn't be angry when people who don't see quite so far as you do utter a melodious complaint."

"No, I suppose not," he said with a laugh; "but I'm quite sure it's no use going back. Transition stages are generally unsatisfactory. It is inevitable that a great deal of accidental beauty must be destroyed; but the thing to do is to push on to that ordered beauty which will come of a more perfect command of materials—more perfect because it is based on sympathy, a reverent understanding of their capabilities."

They had come to the bridge that crossed the deepest part of the cutting. The gang of men who had been working at a point beyond were coming slowly back. One of them had his arm round another's neck, and two or three were singing. As they came nearer they looked up and touched their

caps to Margaret and Fawcett. One elderly man had remained standing on a ledge half-way up the face of red rock.

"They are going to blast," said Fawcett, and his voice was answered by the long wailing note of a horn.

They leaned over the rough timbers of the bridge, mechanically watching the old man.

He struck a match, which burned clearly in the still frosty air, lighted the fuses, and stiffly turning, slipped on the ledge, fell a yard or so, and lay quite still.

Fawcett had just said:

"We had better get—" and without finishing the sentence he left Margaret, walked rapidly to the edge of the cutting, and began to descend. He was half-way down the side before the navvies became aware that anything had happened. They looked at him and back along the line with startled cries. They hesitated, and moved uncertainly.

"How many shots?" said Fawcett, beginning to run.

"Three, sir!" half a dozen voices answered him; and then, as if speech had broken the spell, two of the men started forward, crying, "Come back, sir; we'll go!"

"No, I'll manage!" he called back cheerfully.

Margaret clung to the bridge, the rough timber bruising her breast. Her eyes were fixed, not on Fawcett, nor on the motionless figure of the old man, but on the three snaky jets of smoke in the rock face, twisting this way and that with the energy of the burning composition. She found herself mechanically counting, and wished she knew how long the fuses were timed to burn. A man called "Come away, miss!" but she did not move. She was thinking with extreme clearness. She was glad Fawcett had not looked round to see if she had taken cover. He had taken her for granted. Now he came into her field of vision, which was centered on the twining smoke. He was running at a gentle trot. He glanced quickly to right and left, and she understood as clearly as if he had spoken that he was picking the safest corner when he should have reached the man. She wanted to cry out "There!" and point, but feared to delay him. Just before he reached the man the latter stirred and put his hand to his head, but made no effort to escape. Fawcett half carried, half dragged him behind the buttress of rock, which Margaret had mentally chosen, pushed him down and lay beside him, with one arm over his body.

The face of the rock jumped forward like a puzzle coming to pieces, dense brown smoke rolled out of a dozen fissures, and the ground shook to a deafening explosion. "That's one," said Margaret quietly, aloud, and held tighter to the bridge. A rough cube of rock slowly turned over and fell. "Two." The two figures were hidden by a cloud of dust and smoke. Out of the sky a stone fell with a heavy thud in the roadway behind her. "Three." It was all over. Would the smoke never clear? A long time, it seemed, after the last explosion, a tiny fragment of stone struck and bruised her lip. She did not even put up her hand, but stared fixedly into the cloud of dust and smoke. She was startled by the sound of voices almost beneath her; Fawcett was leading the old man along the cutting. They were immediately surrounded by navvies; a man with a Welsh accent began loudly to praise God; the old man stared stupidly at the palm of his hand, which was covered with blood from his head. Somebody bound up his head with a handkerchief, he was helped out of the cutting and led away.

Margaret remained by the bridge. Fawcett left the little group of men and came to her. She knew that he would come. As he approached she put out

her hands and drew them back again. She was unable to speak.

"That's taught me a lesson," he said quietly, in the tone of one resuming a conversation. "They ought to have a battery, so that the shots can be fired electrically from a safe distance. I've thought of it more than once, but each time I've forgotten to tell the gaffer to get one."

CHAPTER XI

MARGARET found her workshop useful for the purpose of entertaining her friends, including those who did not happen to be in her sister-in-law's visiting list. She was at home there every other Thursday. Mrs. Dixon came or stopped away, just as she felt disposed. Most of Margaret's friends were, of course, also hers, and she was on civil terms with the rest, though she might not have considered them suitable for admission to her own circle by the formal process of calling. There were, for example, two or three farmers' wives, Nurse Wynne and the schoolmaster's wife. As one of Margaret's assistants generally came up to help her with the tea things, so that no extra work was made in the house, the arrangement worked very smoothly. Lately, however, Margaret had begun to fear that her little tea-parties might lead to some unpleasantness in the future. The difference between Mrs. Dixon and Mrs. Hobday about the Cottage Hospital had strained their

terms almost beyond neutrality. A little more, and Margaret would be entertaining people her sister-in-law regarded as her enemies. Margaret was not prepared to give up her friends, nor indeed would Mrs. Dixon have expected her to do so, but the situation was one she contemplated with considerable anxiety.

This rainy afternoon the party in the bare pleasant room consisted only of Mrs. Hobday, the Wakelings and Mrs. Radford, the schoolmaster's wife. Mrs. Hobday was a large, loose, Lelyish creature, with a heart of gold and the manners of an Elizabethan lady. Her husband had made his money in artificial manures. He had, indeed, long given up the effort to make money, which came to him by a sort of fatality, as the coffee-mill in the fairy story went on grinding salt because nobody knew the word to stop it. Young men and maidens whose parents had not made Mrs. Hobday's acquaintance found their way to her house, and she already called several scions of the local aristocracy by their Christian names. She was completely ignorant of the age when tips are no longer in order, and there was a story that she had kissed a blushing subaltern of the guards while pressing a five-pound note into his hand under the impression that he was still at school.

At the first meet of the season she turned up in her motor, and by some accident of humorous malignity was introduced to the duke, who, purple with laughter, spent a quarter of an hour in her company, to the scandal of the other ladies present. Mrs. Hobday badly wanted Margaret to come and live with her. By the irony of fate, her own son and daughter resembled the descendants of a dozen earls, except that they were very clever. Young Hobday was now delighting Oxford with his intellectual and social gifts, and his sister was already quoted as an authority on certain insects.

As the tenants of Compton Lodge, the Hobdays ought to have been the main prop of their parish church, but Mrs. Hobday soon "went over" to Little Compton, partly, as she frankly explained, because Margaret went there, and partly for social reasons, because the Middlemores, the rector and his wife, were, to use her own expression, "so beastly starchy." "And then," she told Percy Wakeling, "I like the way you do things, and the pretty clothes you wear, and all that."

She was at this moment cross-examining Percy Wakeling about his plans for entertaining the school children at Christmas.

"They'll have the usual Christmas tree," he said meekly.

"Usual fiddlesticks!" she exclaimed. "A lot of sour oranges to give them pains in their dear little stomachs, and six-penny-ha'penny toys that they'll quarrel over and break before they get home. No, I'll tell you what. We'll take the whole boiling in to see the pantomime."

"I don't think we could quite manage that," said the vicar doubtfully.

"My dear man," she said, waving her teaspoon at him, "it's the easiest thing in the world. Just you leave it to me. We'll have out three brakes from Bristol, and you and Mrs. Wakeling can nip in with us in the motor."

"Well, it's very kind of you, Mrs. Hobday," he said, attracted, though still fearful, "but I'm not sure if it would do. You see, they'd expect so much another time."

"And besides," put in Mrs. Wakeling, "are you quite sure that a pantomime is altogether a good thing for little children to see? Some of the jokes are dreadfully vulgar."

"Well, they won't take any more harm from them than from some of the pictures in your drawing-

room," said Mrs. Hobday severely. "I was ashamed for Hobday to see them—and he's no chicken."

Wakeling laughed uproariously, but his wife said with solemn dignity:

"Ah, but you see, Mrs. Hobday, they are works of art."

"Art seems to be an excuse for a great many goings-on," said Mrs. Hobday with a sniff. "What do you think about it, Margaret? Don't you think the chicks would enjoy the pantomime?"

"I think it's a capital idea," said Margaret; and Mrs. Radford, a timid, pretty little woman with a confused manner, agreed with her.

"That's all right, then," said Mrs. Hobday, settling down with a rich rustle of silks to her third cup of tea. "I mean to wake you up," she continued with a friendly nod, "I can tell you. You're all asleep. You never do anything that you haven't done for a hundred years, so that you can do it with your eyes shut. Though I must say you're not quite so bad in Little Compton. There's that Mrs. Middlemore. I'm sure I did everything right and proper; one of mine and two of Hobday's, and asked after the baby and grumbled about servants —though, if you ask me, it's generally the mistresses that are to blame. What more did the woman

want? Yet she's never been to see me again, and when I called to ask her if she'd come for a spin in the motor she was quite snuffy. Pushing? Of course I'm pushing. When I take a fancy to people and they won't make first move, I'm not going to stand waiting like a stuck pig just because my father kept a grocer's shop."

She looped up a falling tress and looked round at the company, her large brown eyes moist with affection.

"I want people to be friendly," she said in her deep warm voice. "Of course, we can get down plenty of people from town, but that's not the same thing. It's my neighbors I want. We're not gentlefolks, I know, but what does that matter? We're just plain people who want to have a good time with our money and give others a good time, too. We don't do anything for show; no crests or armorial bearings or any tommyrot of that sort. If we put on side because of our money it would be a different thing. People are afraid of us, that's what it is. But we know how to behave. You know, the year Hobday was mayor of Bristol we got thoroughly coached. It seemed to me the most practical thing to do. Everybody's got to begin sometime, and it's silly to pretend you know how to do things when

you don't. I'm not a snob, but I must say I'm glad Willie makes such good friends up at Oxford. He's bringing down a lord to spend Christmas. It does seem a bit silly, doesn't it? No offense to your relations, Margaret, and I know you are broad-minded."

Wakeling slyly reminded her of her encounter with the duke.

"Now, there's a sensible man if you like," she said stoutly. "If it wasn't for his womenfolk he'd come over to see us like a shot. I gave him a pretty straight talking-to about his nasty cruel hunting, though. I hate to see dumb animals tortured. So does Hobday. He's got a very tender heart." She smiled with a tenderness that made her beautiful. "I'll tell you something about that. The other night I woke up and heard somebody moving about in the hall. I was awfully scared, but I thought I wouldn't wake Hobday—he sleeps in the dressing-room—so I got out of bed and picked up the poker and went to the top of the stairs. 'Who's that?' I called out, and a voice in pajamas said, 'It's only me, Elizabeth.' He'd heard a kitten crying outside, and gone down-stairs to let it in at three o'clock in the morning. The poor little fellow was almost frozen. I had to cuddle him up like a baby."

"Who—the kitten?" said Wakeling, with a sly glance at Margaret out of his merry brown eyes.

"No; Hobday, of course," said Mrs. Hobday with a look of surprised innocence, and somehow it was Wakeling that seemed wanting in taste.

Margaret was absent-minded. She had asked Fawcett to look in for a cup of tea, and was not sure whether she ought to have done so. He had not definitely promised to come, but said that it depended on where his work took him that afternoon. Margaret half-hoped that he would not come, though she knew that she would be disappointed if he did not. She had the unpleasant feeling that she was using her friends: that the establishment of her tea-parties had been all along a cunning scheme to enable Fawcett to visit her. She wished that more men came to her parties; it would make his appearance less glaring. As the afternoon passed and he did not come she grew more nervous, and wondered whether she could perfectly command herself if he suddenly knocked at the door. Presently Mrs. Hobday noticed and remarked upon her lip, slightly bruised by the stone two days ago. On reaching home she had given a truthful account of the injury, but without mentioning Fawcett's rescue of the old man. This gave the Dixons a new grievance against

the railway. Somebody ought to speak about the careless way the blasting was done. Once before a passer-by had a narrow escape. Margaret did not think it worth while to explain to them that the slight accident was caused by her own reckless exposure. Now, under Mrs. Hobday's eager cross-examination, she weakly betrayed the fact.

"Then you saw the whole thing?" said Wakeling interestedly. He had already heard a confused account of Fawcett's bravery.

Margaret described the incident as it had happened.

"And you stood and watched?" said Mrs. Hobday with a thoughtful expression in her brown eyes.

"I really didn't think I was in any danger where I stood," said Margaret with convincing carelessness. But she was beginning to feel a little afraid of Mrs. Hobday. Fawcett's coming would be rather too pat upon the story. Wakeling asked her to play, and she consented with alacrity, hoping that Fawcett would come while she was at the piano.

Choosing her music with regard to her audience, she played Mendelssohn's *Bees' Wedding,* Chopin's *Twelfth Nocturne,* and a chromatic waltz of Godard's. She played with fire, but not very well, because all the time she was listening for a foot

upon the stair. Almost for the first time in her life she was playing with a divided mind, to fill up an interval. Fawcett came just after she had begun the waltz. He looked at her across the piano, and motioned to her not to stop playing; and there was no break in the smooth wind-like rise and fall of semitones. Mrs. Wakeling gave him some tea, and he sat on the blue-covered bed beside Mrs. Hobday, who welcomed him with her large brilliant smile, and under her breath reproached him for not having been to see her lately.

Margaret got up from the piano and went to shake hands with him. He apologized for being so late, and she fancied that he looked white and worried.

That morning he had had a letter from his friend Sidney Baines, who wrote at some length about his recent acquaintance with Austin Lisle. Fawcett now recognized that he disliked being reminded of the poet's existence, and he wished that he had not told Baines that he had met his wife. To his mind, Baines was altogether too charitable in his judgment of Lisle. He spoke of "that superficial faithlessness which is quite incurable because it is part of a temperament, and is dictated by policy, pique, vanity, ambition—anything you like rather than a

real change of affection." "Superficial faithlessness!" Fawcett repeated the phrase throughout the day with an angry sense of what Baines implied by it: that Lisle was as true to his wife as he knew how to be, and probably cared for her as much as ever. Another piece of news in the letter irritated him. Baines had heard that Laura Dacre was going to America. Fawcett knew now what he had wanted from Baines. He had wanted a strongly-drawn portrait of a heartless blackguard to confirm the sketch already existing in his own mind. Baines had, if not blessed, at any rate explained where he wanted him to curse. Now he distrusted Baines' powers of observation; his professional studies had landed him in an absurd tolerance in which he failed to distinguish black from white. He wanted to argue with Baines about a man he had never seen.

He responded good-humoredly enough to Mrs. Wakeling, who adopted her usual bantering tone with him, but with a sting in his replies, and remained firmly planted until the others rose to go. Margaret fancied that Mrs. Hobday hustled them away.

"Will you play for me?" said Fawcett when Margaret came back from the door.

"It's getting rather late," she said, looking at her watch; and then, seeing his impatient movement, added, "Very well; what shall I play?"

He picked up her volume of Beethoven, and turning over the leaves, chose the sonata in E flat major, dedicated to Babette de Keglevics. Margaret sat down to the piano, glad to have this refuge from his disturbed mood. With the exception of the largo, which is full of deep feeling, the whole of this sonata is of a genial character. Indeed, the first movement is almost rollicking, and suggests a fair wind and a prosperous voyage. But the gaiety of the rather long concluding rondo seems to mask an underlying impatience. It is like a man whistling interminably to keep his temper, which may at any moment fly out in a passionate protest. When she had finished he thanked her, with the comment, "Even at his lightest Beethoven draws blood."

She assented, and composed by the exercise, began to talk about her favorite passages, playing a few bars here and there while he stood behind her. She thus played and talked to him for about half an hour, establishing an atmosphere of intimacy in which they were both a little off their guard. When she got up from the piano and stood close to him

with sad eyes and the confidence of a child, he forgot for the moment his common sense, and said impulsively:

"I wish to God we had met before you married!"

"It's no use talking like that," she said with a smile, the tears starting into her eyes. An overmastering impulse got the better of him, and he put his arm around her, murmuring her name. She did not resist, but leaned a little away and laughed in his face. He released her at once, and turned from her.

"Well," she said, "what's the matter? Why do you give over? Am I too easy? But you must remember that I am inexperienced. I have only been kissed by one man except my brother in my life—and he is my husband."

"You don't understand," he said thickly.

"Oh, but I do understand very well," she said in a cold mocking voice. "I am fair game. A married woman separated from her husband is not particular. The bloom is rubbed off. She is marked down in price. Her passions have been awakened. Get her in the right mood, and one man is as good as another. By the time she recovers her head it is too late. She is committed, and she makes the best of it."

He caught her by the wrist and shook her, saying:

"Call me a cad if you like, but stop saying such horrible things."

"No," she said, with a twitch of her white lips; "you are not a cad, and that is what makes it so —so caddish!" She broke down on the last word, and turning blindly away, flung herself down on the little bed and cried convulsively.

He stood where he was, cursing his brutality. When she was a little calmer he said abruptly:

"I'm going."

"No," she said; "I want to talk to you." She motioned him to a chair and went on: "I suppose I had no right to say things like that. It is my fault. I ought to have gone away at the beginning. I stayed—because I wanted to stay. There was no other reason; I wanted to stay because you were here. I thought that you understood, and I trusted to your being at least as strong as I am. But it is quite evident that you did not understand. I beg your pardon for having got your friendship on false pretenses. Let us have a clear understanding now. So long as we live there can never be anything for us except friendship. Never. You may call me unreasonable and cowardly if you like.

You may argue that we might as well be guilty in fact as in spirit. I can't help that. I don't attempt to defend my—prejudices. I am like that. Please don't think that I pride myself on being a good woman. If I were a good woman I should not have taken the risks of being misunderstood. A good woman would have gone away, or would at least have made it so plain that there could have been no risks except on the assumption that you were a cad, which you are not. I want a great deal in return for—what I have already given you. I can give you nothing more. Is it enough?"

He went over impulsively to her, and took her hand and kissed it. Sure of her power, she did not resist him now.

"You see," she said, smiling up at him, "I want a great deal, but I am not jealous—not in that way. If there should be another woman, tell her at once about me—at once, do you hear? Everything will depend on the sort of woman she is. If she is big enough, well and good. If not—I shall not think her unreasonable, nor you faithless."

"There will never be any other woman," he said.

"Don't be rash," she said lightly. "Is it a bargain?"

He hesitated, and she, misunderstanding him, said quickly:

"No, I ought not to ask that—I've no right to tie you down."

"No, it isn't that," he said wretchedly. "Any man who was not an absolute cur would be glad of your friendship on any terms whatever. To the bottom of my heart I am at this moment. But if I promised that I would never, by word or look, let you know that I love you, I should be a liar. With my lips I might promise, but in my heart I should know that I want you for what, except for the cursedness of things, you might have been—my wife."

"Should I be giving you so very much more as your wife?" she asked in a low voice.

"No; not if I were like you. All that there is of me that is fit to be in the same room with you is more than satisfied. No," he said impatiently, and flinging down the piece of leather that he had been turning over in his hands, "that's all nonsense. Deep down in me I know that the division is a false one. I don't believe in it. I don't merely say that my desire for you as my wife is as holy as my desire for your friendship. I say that wrong only

begins when there is any distinction made between them."

"So that I am altogether to blame?" she said with a little sad laugh.

He turned round and stared at her and then stammered:

"What have I said now? I am a clumsy brute!"

"No, not exactly—though you might have been more generous. The division you speak of is very real to me. That is exactly what I am asking you to bear with in me. I'll admit it sounds unreasonable, but it is quite plain to my mind. I can be your very good friend or I could be your mistress. I can't be both at the same time."

He made an impatient movement and said, "No man in his senses would hesitate, but you want me to promise that I shall always be in my senses."

"Do you mean that I want you to choose and pick your words when you speak to me? But wouldn't that spoil everything? No, I think I want to hear everything that comes into your head." She got up, and began to put her music together, saying, "It's surprising how dense a man can be when a woman begins to talk frankly. Well, then, put it this way, if you like: my marriage, as things have turned out, was a wrong to you, but it is a

wrong that under no circumstances whatever can be remedied. You know," she added with a sigh, "you're very exacting."

"No, I'm not exacting," he said stubbornly, "but I simply will not be a humbug. I'm not going to pretend."

"I don't want you to pretend. All I ask is that you shall not expect me to pretend. If I agreed to forget that my husband is alive I should hate myself for a humbug, and I don't think any happiness would come out of that. Do you?"

He did not answer for a moment, but stood absently playing with the hides on the bench.

"It would be less hard," he said, "if we had learned to care for each other by degrees. But it was all done in a moment. There was never any hesitation, was there? It was never in our hands. We were cut for partners."

"Yes, I know that," she said, facing him gladly; "but, you see, we can still choose what cards to play."

CHAPTER XII

HAVING defined their terms of friendship, Margaret felt a warm glow of security. She felt a great deal safer than if the engineer had pretended to be satisfied with a platonic relation. He at least understood her, and if he proved unworthy of the confidence she placed in him she was quite capable of taking care of herself. He did not come to the workshop again, nor did he make any effort to seek her company, but they met occasionally at the Hobdays, and out of doors, and each time she was more and more attracted by his honesty and self-reliance.

On a bright windy afternoon, three days before Christmas, he left his work for an hour to walk with her on the high down between the cutting and Little Compton church, which ran out to a bluff crowned with a circle of half a dozen pines, forming a landmark for miles. From this green hill they had a panoramic view of the surrounding country, from the heights above Bath to the

Forest of Dean, spread out before them like a delicately tinted map. Or, rather, like one of those curious old prints, a compromise between a map and a picture, where, under a busy sky, half a dozen activities are going on at the same time: a battle in one corner, a boar hunt in another, and a rustic fête in the foreground. Here and there a church spire rising from the trees marked the position of a village, and it would have seemed natural if there had been a scroll upon the clouds above it bearing its name.

A light veil of smoke, illumined by the westering sun, lay over Bristol, the city itself being hidden by a slight elevation of the ground. Up here they were a little removed from the world. The nearest human habitation was the vicarage, which lay immediately beneath them, so that they could have pitched a stone into the square well of its slate roof. Overhead the wind sang in the pine tops with a sea-like note, and in the lull of it there came up to them the "chink, chink!" of a hidden quarry, the cawing of rooks in the vicarage garden, and occasionally they felt, rather than heard, the dull rumble of wagons passing to the tip. The cutting was out of sight behind the hill, but they could see the embankment pushed out into the valley, the

piers of the viaduct, and beyond, the outworks of another section. At a point where the new line would join the old a train from Bristol crawled on its way to the Severn Tunnel. The river itself was a pale yellow streak in the distance, bounded by the faint blue Monmouthshire hills.

They walked, leaning in to the wind, and spoke in short sentences a little above their ordinary tones, as if they had much to say in a short time and must necessarily be brief and pointed. The place and the day, the sense of being in the open, high above the world, and the slight physical effort of movement tuned them up to a sincerity that was, perhaps, a little self-conscious. It was not the place or the weather for undertones or evasions. When they reached the little space of comparative quiet within the circle of pines Fawcett said abruptly:

"I wish you'd tell me exactly what there is between us."

"The strongest thing in the world," she said with a sigh, "an idea."

"Or is it an old affection?"

"Ah, you are jealous."

"It's idle to be jealous, I suppose," he admitted; "but I naturally want to know if it is another man or only an abstraction that stands in my way."

"Neither, exactly," she said with a faint smile.

"What do you mean?"

"The man I married is a poet."

"I was afraid it was an affection," he said in a dissatisfied voice.

"Why afraid?" she asked energetically. "If you can't accept that, you have not begun to understand me."

"Then you do love him still?"

"In a way I suppose I do."

"I distrust these refinements and subtleties."

"But leaving you out of account altogether," she said thoughtfully, as if she were working it out for herself, "knowing him and myself as I do now, I wouldn't marry him."

"You would marry me?" he asked eagerly.

"Who can tell?" she replied.

He caught his breath to stifle an imprecation upon his intolerably bad luck in meeting her too late, and for some time remained silent.

"Why did you marry him?" he said at last.

"I was dazzled, I suppose."

"Then he was your equivalent to the novelette hero of the housemaid?" he said bitterly.

She flushed but admitted:

"It was something like that."

"What a great woman you are!" he said impulsively, between shame for his unpardonable rudeness and admiration for her candor. "I have been wondering," he continued, "whether I ought to tell you something. Now I see that I must."

"There is another woman," she said quickly, and laying her hand on his arm.

"There was," he said.

"Then don't tell me—or, yes, you had better."

He told her in a few dry sentences, sparing her nothing of a story that was only remarkable for its lack of any romantic element. He was twenty-one at the time, and going through his course of practical engineering in Liverpool. The girl was a waitress in the café where he got his meals.

"I have always been glad she died before we found out the mistake we made," he said at the end.

"If she had lived?" said Margaret, with a white face.

"It is difficult to say," he said, trying to be absolutely honest. "It is quite likely that I should have married her, which would have meant misery for both of us."

"Then you no longer cared for her?"

"Yes, I did. For a year I was inconsolable. But we should have grown apart. From the moment we

met we were growing apart, though of course we did not know it at the time."

"But if she loved you?"

"What she loved was only a temporary phase of me—certain attributes. The real me, then of course undeveloped, would have bored her horribly. But for the time we were completely satisfied with each other. I suppose we were as nearly happy as two people can be."

Margaret was glad that he did not pretend to any feelings of remorse. Evidently, from his point of view, the episode was morally no better and no worse than an indiscreet marriage; though, on the other hand, he must know that it would shock what he would call her prejudices as no marriage, however sordid or disastrous, could shock them.

"It makes us equal, anyhow," she said rather drearily; "we have each been unfaithful 'after our fashion.'"

"You are more generous than any woman I have ever met," he said, "though I can hardly believe that you can look upon the two cases in the same light."

"Wasn't it the essence of our compact to accept things as they are, as they have been?" she replied evasively.

"Yes," he said, watching her face anxiously; "but this makes a difference to you?"

"Oh, of course it makes a difference!" she said a trifle impatiently, and turning her head away. "Anything like that must make a difference. For one thing, it convinces me that it is something more than a personal prejudice on my part that keeps us merely friends. There is unconscious wisdom behind it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," she said, "don't you see that if you—if we have both been able to make mistakes in the past, how is one to tell we are not making a mistake now, that we shall not—as you said—grow apart?"

"Do you think you will get tired of me?"

"I? Oh, I've stopped growing!"

"Thank you," he said ironically.

"No, stupid, I didn't mean that," she said, laughing sadly; "but it is more than probable that you, with your energy and quick changes of experience, will grow away from me. The world is a big place."

"The obvious remedy is that you should share my experiences."

"It's quite useless to talk about that—as you must know."

"I can only grow toward you," he said emphatically. "Indeed, that is true. It sounds extravagant to say so, but I believe that even if I had never met you I should have been growing in your direction, getting ready for you. You are the happy answer to what might have remained an eternal question. Yet why should I call it extravagant? Similar things really happen every day. Have you heard—no, I suppose you haven't—of that wonderful physical law by which undiscovered elements are implied by the qualities, the tendencies, of others that are known? Now and again a new element is isolated, and the remarkable thing is that it fits into the place already assigned to it. It has been predicted. And astronomers will tell you that no new planet comes quite as a surprise. Why should not the same thing happen in the world of human beings? If I had never met you I should have known that somewhere in the world there was a woman exactly like you, of your height and color, with your mouth and eyes. When I first saw you I could have laughed outright for joy. I wanted to say, 'Ah, here you are!'"

Margaret smiled, because the phrase exactly fitted her own conception of their meeting. But she said:

"It's lucky you didn't. I might have turned round and said, 'I'm afraid you have the advantage of me.'"

"Yes, you might have said so, but I doubt if you would have been telling the truth. And, anyhow, you didn't," he added triumphantly.

"I think you are the most conceited man I've ever met," she said, turning her head away, with a slight increase of color. "But, to go back to your elements. Isn't it true that they are constantly changing?"

"Some of them are changing into one another."

"One to you!" she admitted.

"Seriously," he said, "I believe we can be as sure as any two human beings can be that we are, as the saying is, 'well suited,' and that as we get older we shall become more so. In all important things we think and feel alike. Take the question of religion. After I first met you I hated that church" —he nodded his head in the direction of the building; "I thought that it represented the barrier between us. In a way I suppose it does. But I am beginning to love it."

She looked at him narrowly, and he guessed what was passing in her mind.

"Oh, no, I don't mean that!" he said with a grim smile. "I am not trying to curry favor. What I meant was this. At first I concluded that your religion was just the ordinary thing: a set of rules, a convention that would make you decide questions of right and wrong without any regard to your inner convictions. Now I see that it is a real and living truth to you. That, you will say, makes it all the more hopeless for me. But if I am to lose you, I would rather lose you for something you held to be a living truth than for a convention that you felt you were obliged to obey. If we are both consistent in our separate ways, we are at least in sight of each other, and it is better to be running on different roads which may, for anything we know, be converging, than dodging backward and forward in a tangle of byways. Your way is not my way, but I can at least know where you are at any given moment."

"I'm glad you give me credit for being sincere," she said rather dryly.

"Oh, that's wilful. You know very well that there is a sincerity of the brain as well as of the heart. I must have clear situations myself, though

I'm quite capable of deliberate lying when it suits my purpose; but, on the other hand, many morally honest people are content to live in an intellectual muddle. At all costs I want to know the best and the worst. The best is that we have found each other, and know it, and the worst is that we are separated by something which is vital to you but a matter of no account to me. I recognize no reason, except the mere technicality that you are married already, why you should not live with me as my wife. Your husband would divorce you?"

"Probably; but that doesn't affect the question."

"I didn't suppose it would, for you, though it makes all the difference to me. It is, then, as you said, an idea that separates us. Well, that is final. I take off my hat to an idea, even though I think it is nonsense."

They moved out to the edge of the circle of pines, and looked across to the wooded valley, where the reddish piers of the viaduct were rising above the trees. To Margaret's mind there was something almost sinister in their slow steady growth from day to day. The great masses of masonry, dwarfing the trees, reminded her of a passage she had lately read in a book by Henry James. Describing the Pont du Gard, in Provence, the writer says:

"It came to pass that at the same time I discovered in it a certain stupidity, a vague brutality. That element is rarely absent from great Roman work, which is wanting in the nice adaptation of the means to the end. The means are always exaggerated; the end is so much more than attained. . . . Of this Roman rigor the Pont du Gard is an admirable example."

Of this Roman rigor, thought Margaret, Fawcett was also an example. In his demands upon his fellow creatures he overshot the mark. The effect of him upon her own life was a little like the effect of those huge rectangular piles upon the landscape, and half unconsciously she began to put the impression into words.

"When I was a child that was my fairy wood. Charles and I used to play there at ogres' castles, and pirates, and damsels in distress and rescuing knights. Imagine Charles a rescuing knight!" she broke off to say, laughing a little pathetically. "If I shut my eyes now I can see the whole geography of the place. There is the landing-place and Cape Disappointment, and the cave and the watch-tower. In that little bit of wood are a dozen climates and periods. Every bend of the stream, every tree almost, has its associations; and you come along with a ruler and a pen, or whatever you use, and draw

a straight line through it all like somebody saying, 'It's time to get up!' in the middle of a dream."

"Well," he said, laughing, "I can give you new dreams. When the viaduct is finished you will be able to see your fairy wood in a perspective—from the top. You must admit that a railway gives you at least one new and fascinating experience, and that is a fresh view of familiar country. It's like getting away from your past life and seeing things in their right relations. You look down on places where once you lost your way, and wonder at your blindness."

"Oh, you're a Roman!" she said, turning away. "But I can't help treasuring the little accidents and surprises, the terrors and the blunderings."

Margaret was very happy. She was the sort of woman that can remain contented only with an affection in which her brain as well as her heart is involved. She believed that with Fawcett she had arrived at as nearly perfect an understanding as was possible to two human beings. She was glad now that he had forced the situation the other day in the workshop, and compelled them both to stand out in the light, as it were. The vague fear which had haunted her first acquaintance with him was not removed. He knew her terms of friendship,

and accepted them. Within the limits determined by her scruples, an intimacy was possible between them which would satisfy all the demands of her nature; and if he met another woman who was free to give him what she could not, she would be strong enough to renounce him. She did not forget that no human relation can remain at a standstill, but she did not take into consideration the innumerable little pulls and pushes of outside circumstance. Everything, she thought, depended on themselves.

CHAPTER XIII

FAWCETT found an enthusiastic hero worshiper in Paul Dixon, a frank lively boy, as yet only slightly affected by the snobberies of a small private school for the sons of gentlemen. He had just disappointed his parents by failing to win a scholarship which would have taken him to Winchester, and his Christmas holidays were being spoiled by his father's half serious, half jocular remarks upon his lack of brains. The charge, as Margaret knew, was totally untrue. Paul was neither stupid nor idle, but badly taught. Charles, whose idea of responsibility with regard to the boy's education consisted in paying his fees and reading his report at the end of the term, could not see beyond the fact of failure, and so from the private schoolmaster's point of view he was an ideal parent. He had no plans for Paul's future beyond the general desire that he should do something gentlemanly, and since he was apparently not clever enough to go to a public school on the only terms that could be afforded, he might remain where he was until

it was time for him to be coached for Oxford. If he failed to distinguish himself there, he could always come into the office.

To a boy of Paul's age the railway in course of construction was naturally a fascinating experience. Fawcett good-naturedly gave him the run of his office, and soon found that, so far from being dull, the boy had a constructive imagination unusually well developed for his years, and an intuitive grasp of the principles of mechanics. He said nothing to influence him, however, but talked about him to Margaret, who was not surprised when Paul one day began, in the airy and roundabout fashion of a boy that had been thinking deeply:

"Of course, I know it's no good saying anything to the pater, but I *should* like to be an engineer."

"Well, would you like me to speak to father?" she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Oh, Aunt Margaret, if you only would!" he cried in a glow of gratitude.

Margaret chose an opportunity when Fawcett was there to back her up with practical details, and Charles, who had no definite counter-proposal of his own to make, and was always grateful to anybody who saved him the trouble of thinking, raised but a feeble opposition. He talked vaguely but

grandly about the tendency of the age, and covered his consent with the graceful remark that evidently the boy was fit for nothing better. Margaret kept him to the point until he had arranged that Paul should leave school at the end of next year, and by Fawcett's advice, "go through the shops" of a Bristol firm before being articled to a civil engineer. Having passed the proposal, Charles, figuratively speaking, went to sleep again. Mrs. Dixon was not so easily managed. She had always hoped that Paul would be, like her own father, a clergyman. She had neither considered nor cared whether he was less likely to reach worldly success in the priesthood, but still less whether he had a vocation for the office. Her sole idea was the social rehabilitation of the family. The last generation of Dixons had all been in business, but it had not always been so. Once, according to tradition, they had owned land. There was a titled family of Dixons in Yorkshire. The relationship was not very clear, but in a private drawer where Mrs. Dixon kept one of her wedding cards, Paul's first shoes, and a lock of Mary's hair, there was a portrait of Henry Dixon, Lord Bolton, cut from *The Illustrated London News*. His lordship was remarkably like Charles—particularly about the mustache.

Mrs. Dixon confided her disappointment to Margaret as they sat after dinner in the over-crowded drawing-room, which was at the same time chilly and stuffy. Charles was asleep in one chair with his slippered feet resting on another. His hands were folded, and his pink jowl overhanging his high collar made him look in imminent danger of strangulation. Occasionally he cleared his throat, changed the position of his legs, and said, "Margaret, play us a tune," and immediately went to sleep again. Margaret, who was trying to read *A Child's Garden of Verses,* listened to her sister-in-law's complaint, and unwilling to argue, said soothingly:

"Well, we can't always realize our ideals in full."

"No, I suppose not," said Mrs. Dixon, rather pleased with the last word; "but people will think it so funny. It's horrid to have to explain that Paul isn't really going to be an engine driver."

"But why on earth should you?" said Margaret. "It isn't anybody's business but your own."

"Still, you must admit that it is what is vulgarly called a 'come-down,'" said Mrs. Dixon disconsolately.

"I shouldn't say that to Mr. Fawcett," said Margaret, laughing.

"No, of course I wouldn't go out of my way to hurt anybody's feelings."

"Besides," said Margaret, anxious to reassure her, "there isn't the hard and fast distinction that there was. If you find gentlemen working with their hands, you also meet the sons of small shopkeepers as doctors and clergymen."

"Yes, of course that's true," said Mrs. Dixon reflectively. "As Charles says, the sons of gentlemen are being crowded out of the higher professions. Well, I don't know," she added vaguely, and taking up her crimson spider work, now nearing completion, "everything seems topsyturvy nowadays. I hope it will turn out all right."

Mrs. Dixon, who was only thirty-eight, might have passed for fifty. The idea of womanhood seemed in her to be concealed carefully behind some convention, as if she were the paid custodian of the valueless bric-à-bac scattered about her drawing-room, who might at any moment be called to an account of her stewardship. She was bent and faded and worn, but neither by hard work nor child-bearing. Nor had she any serious anxieties. The character of her far from plain face was destroyed as if deliberately by the dressing of her hair, and the lines of her still shapely figure were

defeated by the frills and flounces of her black lace gown, which was timidly décolleté. There was in her attitude a lack of energy, and at the same time an absence of restfulness. It would have been as difficult to imagine a man deriving inspirations from her as coming to rest his head on her knees for soothing. Margaret, on the other hand, sat upright and still, ardently alive and flagrantly feminine. Without any attempt at girlishness in her dress, she made the most of her firmly molded figure, as if accepting without question her privilege to be attractive. She wore a gown of gray-blue Japanese silk, cut square at the neck, and she was bare-armed to the elbow. From head to foot there was nothing in her appearance to excuse or explain a man's neglecting her for another woman. Indeed, of the two, Mrs. Dixon had far more the aspect of a wronged wife, though she had a husband good to her in every way and two healthy children. Gravely unconscious of herself, Margaret looked wonderingly at her sister-in-law. How could she, who had so many things to make her happy, fritter away the dignity and beauty of wifehood in petty cares and mean asperities? Margaret had somewhere heard or read the remark that there is no more depressing spectacle than the average middle-

aged, married Englishwoman of the middle classes. She had thought the saying false and cruel, but in her present mood she felt the terrible truth of it. Nothing could be less admirable than this placid acquiescence in a conception of marriage in which joy was sacrificed to housekeeping, and children were but the consequences of a habit, to be cherished more or less dutifully. What was wanting, she thought, in Mrs. Dixon, and hundreds like her, was exactly a passionate domesticity. At the same time, she felt a sense of rebellion against the emotional barriers that prevented anything approaching a real understanding between herself and her sister-in-law, though they were always on outwardly affectionate terms.

"It isn't worth worrying about, Polly," she said with more warmth in her voice than usual, and paraphrasing a line out of her book, continued: "There are such a lot of things in life to make one happy."

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. Dixon; "but you haven't the responsibility of children!"

"Responsibility!" said Margaret sharply. She went crimson and then white, and bit her lip to keep back a sudden rush of tears.

"Well, don't you think children are a responsi-

bility?" pursued Mrs. Dixon, in her level, rather plaintive voice.

"Yes, I suppose so! Do you mind having the window open?" said Margaret chokingly.

"Not if the door is shut."

Margaret went to the window, pushed up the sash, and leaned her aching breast on the sill. The intensity of her emotion turned her physically sick; she clenched her hands and ground her teeth, muttering between them, "You fool! Oh, you fool!" Responsibility! This woman, who had known the rapture of a child's lips at her breast, could think of nothing better to say than "responsibility"! Hidden by the blind, Margaret heard her brother grumbling about the draft, but she could not move. Her blood sang in her ears, and with a terrified sense of an unmanageable creature within her she felt the extreme fragility of her protection from Fawcett. All nature and all reason were on his side. Here was she, barely thirty, in the full tide of health and energy, and a man loved her, not with a merely sentimental affection, but with a passion that would positively welcome its probable consequences. Against it she had nothing better to oppose than the abstract idea of fidelity to a man who had been unfaithful to her, and whom she had come

to love only on paper. Her body shook with silent but hysterical laughter as she recalled her trite conversation with Fawcett on the windy down. They had used fine phrases about honesty and responsibility, but in relation to their own natures they were as powerless as flies on a wheel. "I won't, I won't!" she muttered, with close-shut eyes, and recognized that in those words was her only safeguard. Presently she heard Charles moving, and he called to her that he was going round to Major Bland's for an hour. She waited until he had left the room, and then closed the window and went back to her chair.

"What a blessing it is," said Mrs. Dixon, placidly resuming their conversation, "that you never had any children."

"Yes," said Margaret, trying to keep the bitter irony out of her voice.

"As it is," continued Mrs. Dixon, "it is almost the same as if you had never been married—except, of course, that you did not get a divorce."

There were times when this quiet little woman filled Margaret with amazement. She wanted now to say, "Tell me frankly exactly how you two people think about marriage and child-bearing and all the rest of it?" But knowledge that Mrs. Dixon

would only think her indecent restrained her, and she said:

"It would never have occurred to me to do so, even if it had been possible, as under the circumstances it was not."

She took up the volume of Stevenson and turned over the leaves, but she was unable to read. Instead of the lines of print she saw vivid pictures of her own future. Her life as a woman was over. She was unfulfilled, and she must remain unfulfilled. She would become, she supposed, one of those innumerable creatures without the purpose and freedom of men, known chiefly by their names and their clothes, in whom the idea of woman is submerged in that of the lady. She would be merely Mrs. Lisle. She had her work and her interest in her fellow creatures, and she had formed one supreme friendship, but it was a friendship in which her womanhood was a hindrance rather than a help, since it compelled her to be circumspect. Presently Fawcett would go away. Their friendship would continue—oh, yes. They would write letters to each other. Margaret had read volumes of letters written by men and women to whom circumstances had denied the fulfilment of their love.

Always after a time the letters of the women became arch. Archness; yes, that was the final end of suppressed womanly tenderness. She gave a little shiver of disgust and put the book down on her knee.

As if she noticed Margaret's irritability, but mistook the cause of it, Mrs. Dixon said with some embarrassment:

"If there is at any time any alteration you would like in your way of living, Margaret, I hope you'll say so."

The remark startled Margaret, and with an ashamed feeling of being on guard, she said:

"I don't quite understand what you mean, Polly."

"We have always lived very quietly, because it suits both Charles and me to do so, but it has occurred to me lately that perhaps you would like more society."

"What makes you think that?" said Margaret.

"You seem to spend a good deal of your time at the Hobdays'."

"Well, I like Mrs. Hobday," said Margaret frankly. "You don't mind, do you?" she asked.

"It would be unreasonable of me to mind."

Margaret felt inclined to say, "Then why speak

of it?" But she curbed her impatience, and said: "I'm sorry you don't happen to like her, but that can't be helped, can it?"

"I don't allow my likes and dislikes to influence my sense of what is fitting," said Mrs. Dixon, holding her head on one side as she smoothed out the sewing on her lap. "I hope I am always courteous to Mrs. Hobday when she comes here. But I was not thinking so much of Mrs. Hobday as of the people you meet at her house. There is no reason at all why you should not ask your friends here. Of course, I can't pretend to compete with Mrs. Hobday in the way of entertainment, Charles' income does not permit me to do so; but I shall always be pleased to do my best to entertain anybody you care to ask here."

"I suppose you mean Mr. Fawcett," said Margaret, with good-humored bluntness.

Mrs. Dixon looked rather frightened, and said:

"I don't know that I was thinking of anybody in particular, but since you have mentioned his name, there can be no harm in discussing him. He doesn't come here very often, does he? And I'm sure we tried to make him feel at home."

"His time is pretty well occupied."

"He finds time to go to the Hobdays'."

"Well," said Margaret, laughing, "you know how persistent Mrs. Hobday is when she takes a fancy to anybody."

"You and he seem to have so much in common to talk about," said Mrs. Dixon apologetically.

"We have," said Margaret; "but when it comes to the question of asking a man to the house it is surely your place or Charles'."

"I think Charles took it for granted that he would come when he wanted to. But I will ask him to invite Mr. Fawcett, if you like."

"Don't you think that it is perhaps better to let these things arrange themselves automatically?" said Margaret.

Mrs. Dixon looked rather hurt.

"Oh, of course, if Mr. Fawcett doesn't care to come here," she said, "we can't make him."

"I'm sure he likes coming here," said Margaret desperately. "What I meant was that I don't want you to go out of your way to ask him simply because he is a friend of mine. Particularly since you don't seem to like him very much."

"I can't think why you harp so much on the question of likes and dislikes, Margaret," said Mrs. Dixon querulously. "There are certain duties of

hospitality which one ought to fulfil. Though, as a matter of fact, I do like Mr. Fawcett. It's quite evident, however, from his manner and from what you say, that he dislikes me. I suppose I bore him."

"That's ridiculous, Polly. But I know that he does not care very much for cards."

"Well, there's no reason why we should not spend the evening in conversation. Two well-informed men can always find plenty to talk about, and I am a good listener. Or we might have a little music. Mr. Fawcett is fond of music, isn't he?"

"Yes," Margaret admitted.

There was a little silence, and then Mrs. Dixon, bending over her work with a slight increase of color, went on: "It has always been my wish that you should regard our house as really your home, and not merely as a place to live in. Of course, I know that in a good many ways it is not the sort of life you have been used to. The kind of society you met in London has naturally altered and perhaps broadened your interests. That's why I thought at first that your Thursday afternoons were a very good idea. It enabled you to make your own circle. But I should be very much distressed to think that you felt that you had to entertain your friends in

your workshop or go to other people's houses to meet them because you could not receive them here —as if you were a sort of governess."

"Oh, Polly," said Margaret impulsively, with tears in her eyes, "what an ungrateful beast you must think me! Of course, the Thursday arrangement is only a matter of convenience."

At the first sign of emotion Mrs. Dixon took alarm. She smiled nervously, and said: "Well, if you are sure it is only that, I'm quite satisfied. As I said, we do our best to make you happy and comfortable."

Margaret's quick sympathy caught the kindly intention under the stiff little phrase, and casting discretion aside, she went over and kissed her sister-in-law.

"You dear thing," she said, "you made it possible for me to go on when everything had gone to pieces, and you can't do more than that. I'm perfectly contented so long as you don't put yourself about on my account."

Mrs. Dixon was evidently as disconcerted by Margaret's impulsive action as if a man had kissed her hand in a full drawing-room, but she bore it bravely, and even returned the kiss. When Charles came back from Major Bland's, dense though he

was, he felt the unaccustomed agitation in the air, and said, "Hallo! Have you two been squabbling?" —the only form of feminine emotion he could understand. They both laughed pityingly, and for the remaining ten minutes before they went to bed talked about trifles in the exaggeratedly serious way of people who have agreed "to say no more about it."

Margaret recognized that Mrs. Dixon's desire to please her, though kindly meant, was prompted by uneasiness about her intimacy with Fawcett. She had been prepared for criticism sooner or later, but this maternal consideration for her welfare disarmed her. She could not, under the circumstances, tell Mrs. Dixon to mind her own business. But she was vexed all the same. She did not want, nor did she intend, to give up her Thursday afternoons, but she felt that she could never again enjoy them with the same sense of freedom. Until now she had not sufficiently remembered that the one thing society can not bear with equanimity is an intimacy between two persons of opposite sex which is not frankly a flirtation and yet can not lead to marriage.

CHAPTER XIV

LISLE'S new volume of poems came out in March. To Margaret the event was at once a vindication of her belief in him as a poet and a final confirmation of her painfully acquired knowledge that in marrying him she had taken the man altogether for granted. Now she recognized quite clearly that in a question of marriage the man was very much more important than the poet. At the time she had been unable to disentangle him from not only his own work, but her sense of romantic beauty in general. She had loved and married a creature of her imagination, and found herself tied to a man who clashed violently with her ideal of what a husband ought to be. She had now reached a position of complete detachment with regard to the whole question. Lisle's unfaithfulness to her seemed to have lost its point as a personal injury. It did not seem to matter what he did so long as he wrote good poetry. If anybody had come to her now with scandalous tales about him she would

have turned on them with the commonplace that their concern was with his work and not with his life. She would have quoted to them Gautier's words, "Good poets are still rarer than honest folk, although the latter can hardly be said to be too common."

Her appreciation of him as a poet had emerged so unaffected by his conduct as a man, and so enthusiastic, that she had the whimsical thought that if she had in the first place married Fawcett and then met Lisle, the former might have been jealous, without cause, but very pardonably. Short of giving herself to Lisle, she would have given him anything else. She would have done anything to help him. In a sense she would have done more for him than for the other. She wondered whether Fawcett would have been big enough to understand, whether any man could understand, what a world of difference there is between admiration and love.

Every time she opened the book she was enchanted afresh by some beauty of idea or felicity of expression. The poems a little bewildered and humiliated her, too. Apparently she had done so little for Lisle. His marriage with her had not sufficed to cleanse from his work that character of the meretricious, the factitious, like a whiff of patchouli from

among the garments of a dryad, which had kept the better sort of his admirers uneasy in their judgment. There was not a trace of it now. It must be supposed, then, that Laura Dacre had had this extraordinary purifying effect upon his work. She had helped him to write better poetry. He must have found his true mate in Laura Dacre. Thinking this over, Margaret came to the conclusion that it was after all not unprecedented. From the history of literature it would appear that over and over again poets have done their best work under the influence of women who by every feminine standard must be called inferior. There must be something in the poetic temperament, she thought, which required in human relations some taint of the gutter. That being so, she cheerfully allowed the implied criticism of herself that in marrying Lisle she had hindered him. She had been officious and exacting. She went further: if she had wronged Fawcett in marrying Lisle, he in marrying her had wronged Laura Dacre. It was extravagant, of course, but then she was prepared to be extravagant, to concede everything—this is what it worked out to—to justify her love for Fawcett.

The effect upon her was so comforting that in an impulse of generosity she wrote to Lisle wishing

him joy of his success. She ought to have stopped there, but her desire to overpay for the one privilege she claimed from him carried her on, and she wrote: "I remember that I said bitter things—probably things that were untrue. There is no need to reopen a painful subject now, but I want to say this: It was at the beginning as much my fault as yours. I ought to have known better. My excuse is that I was twenty-two. Let us shake hands on it, so; that we both made a mistake." Only her sense of humor caught her up on the edge of trying to let him know in some ingenious way that he had been quite wrong in calling her temperamentally cold and hard.

Not the least factor in her whole-hearted enjoyment of the poet's triumph was freedom at last from the self-reproachful idea, always present at the back of her mind, that her desertion of him, though humanely justifiable, might have been perhaps a treachery to his art. Evidently he was better off without her. Everything had turned out for the best, as the saying goes.

Although she had no doubt in her own mind about the quality of the poems, her desire to share as far as possible in their success with the world sent her on a special journey into Bristol to her

bookseller's, where she ordered every literary journal she could think of. The papers came by the afternoon post on Saturday. She took them unopened into her workshop, to read them undisturbed. On Saturday mornings Margaret's girls were claimed by their mothers for domestic duties and did not come to the workshop, which was then scrubbed and tidied. Margaret on her entrance was greeted with the pleasant smell of drying boards and the scent of white hyacinths which stood in a row along the window-sill. In the newly-blackened grate a fire was laid ready for Monday morning. Luxuriously inclined to read the reviews in the most comfortable surroundings, Margaret lighted the fire, and while it was burning up moved about the workshop humming a tune. She opened wider the casements of the window, sniffed at the hyacinths and gave a finishing touch to the already tidied materials on the bench. Then she pulled an easy chair up to the fire, and with a thrill of expectation opened the parcel of papers.

Not all of them, she found, contained reviews of Lisle's poems, and she flung the negligent ones rather petulantly aside, as if they had failed to justify their existence. It occurred to her then that she would have saved herself trouble if she had sent

a guinea to a press-cutting agency, and she made a mental note that she would do so. Four of the more important weekly newspapers, however, had reviewed the poems at length, and as far as she could judge at a preliminary glance, in terms of the highest favor. "Aha!" she chuckled gladly, on seeing at the end of a two-column notice, the signature of the sturdy Philistine who from the beginning of Lisle's career had refused to take him seriously. The old scoundrel, as she called him, was still guarded, but he said enough to constitute a handsome reparation from a man of his weight and character. The other notices were frankly eulogistic. Margaret settled down to read them in earnest. She had brought the green volume of poems with her, and every now and then she referred to it with an eager smile of assent or a frown of consideration, as she agreed with or differed from the reviewer. Flushed with pleasure, and forgetful of time, she read on. There was a knock at the door. "Come in!" she cried gaily, without looking up from the page. Fawcett entered.

She recognized at once that it was the wrong moment. It was as if he had found her in intimate conversation, innocent but requiring explanation, with another man. Her face must have betrayed

what was in her mind, for he said rather surprisedly:

"Have I disturbed you?"

"Oh, no, no. Come and sit down," she said, rising awkwardly.

Her momentary confusion had not effaced from her cheeks and eyes the glow of pleased excitement. Even her gray-clad figure seemed more flowing in outline than usual, as if her limbs were relaxed by some genial emotion. The hard brightness of manner which with him she assumed, if he had only known, for protection, was dissolved in a soft radiance. She looked happier, more womanly than he had ever seen her. As he crossed the room with his eyes hungrily upon her he felt that he would have given ten years of his life to make her look like that. His quick perceptions saved him from the last cruel blunder of supposing himself the cause of her emotion, but he did not see the papers until he was close upon them. He picked one up, glanced at it and dropped it with a bitter smile.

"Oh, don't be little! Dear, don't be little!" she said passionately, putting her hand on his arm.

It was the first time she had used a term of endearment to him, and he thought miserably that the occasion robbed him of even the flavor of that.

"It's an intolerable situation," he said, turning his head away.

"It needn't be," she said eagerly. "This," she indicated the papers strewed around her, "is all outside. It doesn't count. But I can't—didn't we agree not to pretend? I *am* interested, I *am* glad, and why should I try to hide it?"

He shook his head, saying:

"It's ridiculous of me to complain, of course, but it does count. Do you mean to say that if that book wasn't his—" he pointed to the volume lying open, face downward, in the chair.

"Of course it's because it's his," she replied emphatically. "You can't live with a man for five years and brush him off like a fly."

"There are times," he said drearily, "when I wish I had never seen you."

She turned away, saying in a low tone:

"If it's all worth so little to you, there is of course nothing to be said."

"Worth?" he cried savagely—"it's worth dying for? But what do I get out of it? Nothing but pain and disappointment."

"If I had been weak—"

"For God's sake don't talk like that! You know, you *know* it isn't true. You know what I want. I

would say it on my mother's grave. It is yourself."

"Ah, be patient with me."

"Oh, if it's a matter of waiting, I can wait," he said eagerly.

"No, I don't mean that. You mustn't misunderstand. It's never," she said rapidly, closing her eyes and shaking her head to give emphasis to her words.

"Not if he died?" he muttered.

"Don't let us be shameful," she said gravely.

"No, you are right," he admitted after a pause. "At the same time, we are deceiving ourselves."

"What do you mean?"

"That," he said, pointing again to the book. "There is yourself. You can not escape. You're given."

"I never gave," she replied firmly. "I hadn't myself to give. I hadn't come to my own. It is almost as if I was married without my consent. I was taken in a silly dream. Surely you are not so primitive, so barbarous, as to resent—"

"No, you misunderstand me," he said impatiently. "I'm not jealous in that way. I can wipe out the past. It's the present and the future that I am uneasy about. I come here and find you soaked in

him, and you say, 'It's all outside; it doesn't count.' Why, you were nursing his child!"

He turned away with a shake of disgust. She gave a melancholy half-smile, and said quietly:

"I'm glad you said that. It makes it easier for me. Very well, then, call it his child. But it is his child by another woman. There's nothing of me in it."

"Nothing of you? That's impossible. No man who wasn't an insensitive clod could shake off your influence so easily—and he is anything but a clod. If he had been unfaithful to you a dozen times, no woman could supplant you. He can't get away any more than you can. He's always between us, and in the end he'll win."

"It simply isn't a matter for argument; we shall say things that we'll regret. Dear," she said imploringly, "we're muddling things up so dreadfully. And it needn't be. It's all so clear. Can't you see that the only personal feeling I have in it is the wish to make up to him for what I gain—as if he were somebody left out."

"But what have you to make up to him?"

"It takes two people to make the mistake we made."

"You're over-scrupulous," he said, with a shrug,

"and that's always dangerous. Leave the past alone."

"I'm not thinking of the past except as it affects the present. But I want a clean slate."

He stood looking away from her, with bent head and a brooding expression.

"Did he send you this book?" he asked abruptly.

"No, but there's no reason why he shouldn't have done so. This is altogether the wrong time to tell you," she added disconsolately, "but I had better. I've written to him."

At this he fairly laughed.

"Oh, this is too much," he said bitterly. "It's sheer comic opera. Tell me some more. No—don't tell me what you said to him. I really can't listen to what a wife wrote to her husband."

"Oh, if you could understand," she said with a patient sigh.

"I confess I can't. No, it's beyond me; the joke is altogether too subtle. As you said, I'm primitive, I'm Roman. My trade is all with straight lines and measurable angles."

The ironical humor of the situation did not escape her, and in spite of her grief she could almost laugh at him. Here was she, a wife, defending to

her lover her appreciation of her husband's literary success.

"But I'll tell you what I said to him," she said with dignity. "I told him that I was glad and proud, and that I had no grievance against him. Was that too much? Was it under the circumstances unnatural?"

"No," he said, moving impatiently, "it isn't that in itself. What you said doesn't really matter. It all comes of our unnatural, our unstable arrangement. If you were my wife you might write to him every day and say what you liked. I should never even want to know what you said. As we are, I am not sure of you; I have nothing to make me sure, everything to disturb me. I can't help seeing in this book and this correspondence that which keeps us apart. I come here, and I find you moved as I have never seen you moved, and surrounded by the atmosphere of him. Is it any wonder that I am disturbed? I am only human."

"You want a sign," she said reflectively. "But what can I give you for a sign? Do you want me to be melodramatic? If I flung this book in the fire would you be satisfied?" He did not answer, and she went on: "One thing you don't seem to recog-

nize is that it makes me glad that I have nothing to reproach myself with. If he had gone to pieces I should always have been worried with the thought that perhaps I had treated him badly. Now I've a clear conscience. It seems to me that it's you who are afraid to face the facts. Is there any real danger in anything that we can talk about openly? I don't want there to be any dark corners where a ghost may jump out. Let us build our viaduct on a clear understanding; let us have the new perspective you talked about. I can think about the past like that. It's the view from above—from where we are."

"Oh, I suppose I'm unreasonable," he said moodily; "I expect too much."

"I won't have you say that. You simply can't expect too much."

"Ah, but we are using words differently. Well," he said, as if with an effort to shake off his dejection, "I suppose I must get used to the idea. I wish you hadn't written to him, however."

"Why?"

"He will not understand. He will mistake it for an overture."

"No," she said indignantly, after a startled pause. "He can't. That's impossible."

He wondered if she knew that Lisle had broken

with Laura Dacre. It was not his business, he said, to tell her, though he would not admit to himself that he was afraid to.

"In any case," she went on, "it would make no difference if he did so completely misunderstand me."

"Have you heard from him at all lately?"

"No," she answered in a tone of surprise; "why should I? It was final, and he knew it was final. I left him no shadow of doubt. Though even I did not know at the time how final it was. I would never have believed, for example, that I should be able to communicate with him on friendly terms."

He could not doubt her sincerity, but he doubted whether she knew herself.

"There is nothing he could do that would make you go back to him?"

"Nothing in the world—putting you out of the question. Don't you see," she added a little impatiently, "that is why I can give him—all this—with a perfectly free mind?"

He reflected whether after all he had not been mistaken in calling her out fully armed to meet him. If he had laid siege to her on a lower plane, brutally made sure of her, there would have been no danger then. He might fairly have risked her awakening.

But he dismissed the thought angrily. Better a thousand times this agonizing privilege than the security of brute conquest.

"What a fool I am," he said, picking up his cap; "another afternoon wasted in useless argument, when I might have sat and watched you playing."

He stood flicking his cap against his leg for a few moments, and then said, with a grim smile:

"Will you lend me the book?"

She turned away her head and her eyes swam.

"You really are angelic, you know," she murmured, with a little broken laugh. "Yes, of course I will. Tell me what you think of the poems. I believe you'll like these better. Wait a minute," she added, as he turned away; "I'm coming."

He bent over a hyacinth, pretending not to notice, as she gathered up the papers and put them tidily together on the bench. Nevertheless he was glad that she did so. If she were not sure of herself she would have affected to disregard them.

CHAPTER XV

SINCE Mrs. Dixon's complaint that Fawcett neglected her house she had made no further reference to a subject that evidently caused her some anxiety. That she had in the interval communicated her uneasiness to Charles was indicated by his beginning to chaff Margaret about the engineer, nervously, with heightened color and a deprecating laugh, as if to say, "I hope it's all right, you know." It was, indeed, hardly to be supposed that these two persons' frank preference for each other's society should pass without comment, though as yet nothing had been said that could properly be called scandal. Fortunately, Margaret's history and general disregard for Compton's standards of propriety gave her in the minds of her neighbors a latitude which they would have denied to one of themselves. Her ways were not their ways. She was expected to behave oddly. Mrs. Wakeling, who evidently assumed that Margaret cultivated Fawcett for the same reason that she herself smoked cigarettes and allowed in

her drawing-room pictures that might be called "daring," to startle the Philistines, announced at tea-tables her approval of the friendship. Margaret, however, though she would have preferred not to disturb her brother and his wife, paid no attention to the opinion of outsiders; and when Fawcett's regard for her comfort led him to suggest more discretion in their meeting, she said proudly:

"No. We've begun as we mean to go on, and anything there is to be said against us had better be said now."

"You talk of going on," he said, a little chilled by the terms defined, "as if I were able to stop here forever."

It was the first time that either of them had found courage to refer to the separation that was increasingly present in both their minds. At the time she made no answer, and he had not the heart to pursue the subject; but a few days later he stopped her by the cutting, and told her that he had that morning received definite notice from the company that Mr. Thompson would be ready to resume his duties at the end of May. That had been made perfectly clear.

"Don't let's spoil the present by talking about it,"

she said with a readiness that proved how often she had anticipated the news in her own mind.

"I don't want to," he said, "but the fact has got to be faced. What are we to do?"

"Can't you get another appointment near here?" she asked, feeling the words to be in vain.

"It isn't likely that anything worth while will turn up within a hundred miles."

"Where shall you go?" she asked faintly, picking at the bark on one of the posts that fenced the line.

"God knows. It might be anywhere in England or abroad. In any case, if I don't hear of anything before I leave here I shall have to go up to London to put myself in the way."

Margaret made no comment, but stared blankly at a passing train of trucks, as if to realize the fact of his going away. When they had passed he went on gravely:

"Do you realize, Margaret, that after the end of May we may never see each other again?"

It was, she remembered, the second time he had used her name, and the reverence with which he said it now seemed to show how much he had learned of her in the interval, and touched her deeply. But she only said:

"Why need we anticipate? We have nearly three months of spring before us."

"To be followed by a lifetime."

She turned away from leaning on the wire fence, and said as they walked on toward the bridge:

"We shall write."

"Yes, we shall write," he disconsolately repeated.

"Well, isn't that something?" she said, turning to him with a half smile that was a little reproachful.

"Have you no human blood in your veins?" he demanded impatiently. "I want to see you, hear you, feel your presence. The touch of your hand is more to me than any words you can put on paper."

"You are to regard yourself as perfectly free; remember that," she said, after a moment.

"Free to anything but the one thing I want," he said dryly. "I make no vows," he continued, "but whatever happens to me in the future will be second best."

"Don't most of us have to be content with second best?"

"No doubt; but the depressing thing is to have had the best within reach, and to have known it at the time."

She rather lamely quoted to him, "To take by leaving, to hold by letting go." Renunciation, she said, had its own value. But he frankly laughed at her.

"We're getting too abstract," he said. "Let us consider exactly what it is we're giving up. We are both old enough to be able to make a fairly true estimate of what we should gain by being always together. Neither you nor I imagine that the future, if we shared it, would be one long unclouded dream of happiness. What we claim is very reasonable: the sober reality of husband and wife, the responsibilities, the humdrum give and take of married people; the right, in fact, to live our lives under conditions that will call out the best that is in us as man and woman. To give that up is not only to lose the joy of comradeship, but to deny ourselves our full development. I'm not romantic: I don't suppose I shall adopt any of the orthodox alternatives of the disappointed lover; I shan't go to the devil, begin writing Satanic poetry, or blow out my brains. In fact, I can't pay you any of the extravagant compliments you deserve. I won't even say that my life will be ruined; I shall get along, but it will be life with the edge off. I'm ambitious, yes; but ambition is a gritty affair, after all. You

will go on doing admirable work in leather and helping village girls to better themselves. I don't want to argue the consistency of your creed," he went on, after a moment's hesitation, "but there is this, though: Why do you uphold in human lives a principle that you would condemn in the rest of nature? You don't call it a virtue in the stunted tree that its loss is another's gain. By rights the haven of your breast ought to be given to the smallest and least perfect flower you can find, because it has suffered for the others."

"I know what you mean," she said, "but there is the mystery. The moment you begin to deal with men and women something else comes in." Very humbly and frankly she tried to explain to him what she meant by the value of renunciation. She spoke of the spiritual benefits, not only to the individual, but to humanity in general, which may result from the giving up of natural rights.

He listened to her patiently enough, though it was all moonshine to him, and said:

"I've heard that said of people who go into nunneries, and perhaps it's true. But, you'll observe, it is known that they have given up. Are you going to stand on the housetop and say what we give up and why we give it up? Granting that yours is

the better way, can you give me a single concrete instance of a man or a woman that will gain by it?"

"Yes, I can," she said, flushing, and walking a little faster; "there are the girls. If we agreed to take our reasonable right, as you call it, they would still be unable to distinguish between our case and a dozen others which you yourself would condemn. They have all sorts of temptations, and they would say, 'What is the good of trying to keep straight?' I know this sounds horribly priggish," she added, her color deepening, "but one does owe an example."

"It would be quite easy to turn that round," he said, as they halted by the bridge, "and argue that you've no business to doctor your morality to suit their intelligence. What, for example, did you say the other day about discretion?"

"Ah, that was with regard to people who ought to know better than to mistake us," she said rather lamely.

"It won't do," he said, smiling at her grimly; "you're splitting hairs. The only rational thing to do is to go ahead and leave the rest to scramble after."

"We do go ahead," she insisted.

"So we come back to our starting point," he said,

with a sigh. "Well, I suppose it's easier for you; you can make it square with your whole philosophy. I can't."

The truth of that was evident in their appearances. She derived a strength and a bloom from an ideal which only vexed him by its unreasonableness. It was an ideal renunciation that still allowed her to love and be loved. Never in her life had she looked so well or so happy. He, on the contrary, had visibly aged the last few months. He was thinner, and he looked ill. The double strain of his work and his passion was telling on him. Keenly as he delighted in her presence, there were times when he felt that he would be almost glad when he could no longer see her.

In spite of her instinctive recoil from discretion in conduct which she held to be blameless, Margaret was a little worried by Fawcett's evident disinclination to make himself at home at the Dixons'. It was not only that he would seem to be refusing the olive branch which Mrs. Dixon had held out, but Margaret foresaw that if ever trouble came of their intimacy, it would come through her sister-in-law's dislike of Mrs. Hobday. Clearly Mrs. Dixon believed that she went to Compton Lodge solely to meet Fawcett. That was unjust and untrue, but

Margaret could never go there without the sense of renewing a grievance.

How quietly social revolutions may come about was well illustrated by the progress of the Hobdays. The first clash of their introduction into an older social order was now over; their newness was a little staled. Mrs. Hobday had learned discretion in making overtures of friendship, and her neighbors on their part had found out that there was nothing very shocking in her manners. It was also a little difficult to hold aloof from a woman at whose house you met people you had been perhaps rather glad to know in London. Willie's lord, for example, had worked wonders. Gradually Compton Lodge was resuming its place as the social center of the neighborhood.

Compton Lodge was a small but good example of the Tudor buildings fairly common in Gloucestershire. When Mr. Hobday bought the estate it had long been decaying in the hands of people ironically called caretakers. He used the old house tactfully, and the amount of money he spent upon it was not evident in any startling excrescences, though he made every possible provision for comfort and convenience. He removed paint from paneling, repaired roofs and replaced the delightful

little ogee belfry, calling out the character of the place with the reverence of a man restoring an old picture. Whenever he was in doubt what to do, he called in the best advice procurable. As he said to Margaret, "It's so easy to make mistakes." In several details he consulted her, so that, apart from her liking for the family, she felt quite a personal interest in the house.

On an afternoon about a week after Fawcett had told her that he was definitely leaving at the end of May, she sat at tea with Mrs. Hobday and her daughter Vera, who had only lately returned from wintering among learned societies in London. Vera was a straight-backed, athletic-looking young woman in a tailor-made suit, with aquiline features and humorous brown eyes. The leaded casements of the long drawing-room were open to the mild air and moist odors of the garden, where blackbirds fluted among the budding lilacs. On the open hearth, under its finely proportioned four-centered arch, carved on the spandrels with the arms of a forgotten family, a wood fire flickered pleasantly. Mr. Hobday, a little, bandy-legged, inarticulate man, with a surprised expression, as if the skin of his clean-shaven face were too tightly drawn, had been showing Margaret his last new Düror etching,

with the unexpectant courtesy of the connoisseur, and had now pattered off to his den. Vera, who sat on the stone window-sill, surrounded by three Persian cats and a borzoi, was trying to persuade Margaret to spend the summer with her in Burgundy, where she was going to study phylloxera.

"Yes, Margaret, it would do you good," said Mrs. Hobday, who overflowed a chair beside the tea-table; "and I should feel ever so much more comfortable about Vera. You could at least see that she didn't go to bed in her boots. Besides, I don't like the idea of her trapsing about Europe alone."

"But what's to become of my girls?" said Margaret lightly, to cover her firm but unreasoning conviction that the plan was impossible.

"Oh, they'd go on all right," said Mrs. Hobday. "Lizzie Matthews is a capital business woman, and I'd look in every now and then. Or, if you like, they could bring their work here. There's plenty of time for you to coach me up—Vera isn't going till the beginning of June."

Margaret knew that her promise to "look in" was not idle; that she would bring to the business of the workshop the same clear intelligence as of an eager child with which she followed up the interests

of her family, her daughter's insects, her son's reading, her husband's prints. It was also plain to Margaret that she was being sympathetically managed. Mrs. Hobday knew when Fawcett was going, and she wanted to offer a distraction. There was no reason why Margaret should not go to France—she only felt that she couldn't; and it struck her with disconcerting force how reluctant she was even to think about the future.

"You'd find plenty to do," said Vera, whose voice was a clear-toned echo of her father's abrupt husky murmur. "It's the most beautiful country for sketching—all that sort of thing. Interesting towns: Dijon, Besançon, forests, mountains, somewhere about—easy reach of Switzerland. And, besides," she added, coming to what for her was more solid ground, "you would be really a help to me, because you speak French so much better."

"It's most awfully kind of you," said Margaret, with a terrified sense that all her reasons were being reduced to "I won't," "but I'm afraid it can't be done."

"You want something fresh to occupy yourself with. You'll be getting narrow-minded," said Mrs. Hobday.

"Oh, you wait," said Margaret, fencing; "we've

lots of new plans for this year. We're going to start copper-work directly."

"So you said six months ago. But it's change of scene you want," persisted Mrs. Hobday; "new faces."

"There'll be plenty of new faces," said Margaret, eagerly catching at an opening to change the subject. "We live in stirring times. Compton is waking up. Pearce, the grocer, told me yesterday that we are to have the electric light."

"About time," said Mrs. Hobday grimly; "the roads here after dark would be a disgrace to Central Africa. But do you mean to tell me," she returned to the charge, "that you intend to spend all your life in a potty little village like this?"

Before Margaret could frame an answer which would at the same time satisfy Mrs. Hobday and express her own contentment, she heard firm quick footsteps coming along the flagged hall. That the Hobdays, like herself, had heard and recognized them to be Fawcett's she could tell by the way that, though obviously listening, they avoided looking at her and each other. He came abruptly, even for him, shutting the door and walking up to his hostess with the directness that Margaret liked so well in him. She was rather surprised to see him, for she

knew that he had bicycled into Bristol that morning on business which would occupy him some hours. Evidently he had only just returned, and had come straight on here without stopping to remove the traces of his muddy ride from his clothes.

"We're talking about the electric light," said Mrs. Hobday with slightly exaggerated composure. "Is it really coming off, or is it only talk?"

"Can't say, I'm sure," said Fawcett absent-mindedly, taking a cup of tea from her and remaining standing. "There's no reason why it shouldn't be done, with a good stream of water on the spot."

He had merely greeted Margaret on his entrance, but she knew that he had something particular to say to her which he did not care to say before the others, and that in all probability he had come here on purpose to see her. He was slightly paler than usual, but he looked excited rather than depressed. He set down his cup and declined Mrs. Hobday's invitation to smoke, though evidently without noticing what he said, for he presently took out a cigarette, stopped in the act of striking a match and said, "May I?" Mrs. Hobday nodded with a compassionate smile, and Vera murmured self-consciously to one of her cats. They talked about indifferent subjects till Margaret, seeing that it cost

Fawcett a painful effort to give his attention to what was being said, got up from her chair. Mrs. Hobday kissed her good-by, and with admirable tact included Fawcett in her dismissal, so that he did not need to excuse himself. When he and Margaret had left the room, Vera looked across at her mother and said affectionately:

"You old dear!"

"Not a bit of it," said Mrs. Hobday stoutly. "I won't have any of that sort of nonsense at my house, but those two are altogether different. All the trouble comes from not knowing when to make exceptions."

Fawcett waited until they were half-way down the avenue of reddening elms, and then he said abruptly and dryly:

"I've just had the offer of a first-rate job in the Argentine Republic."

Margaret swayed a little in her walk, and then quickened her footsteps.

"I found the letter when I got back from Bristol," he went on. "The post—it's a railway—is not for competition. A friend of mine who is copper-mining out there has been useful to the government. It is offered to me to take or leave."

"When?" she asked faintly.

"I must be out there early in July."

"For how long?"

"The contract is for three years."

"Must you decide at once?" she asked in a low voice.

"Within a week."

They had reached the iron gate between its two tall pillars surmounted by stone balls. Until now he had avoided looking at her, but with his hand on the gate he glanced at her colorless face.

"Come with me," he said.

"No, I can't," she said, hardly above a whisper.

"He would divorce you."

She made some inarticulate answer.

"If you came with me he would divorce you," he repeated sternly, and bending toward her.

"No, no, no. It's not a bit of good!" she said, recovering her voice. "Open the gate, please!"

He did so, and they passed out into the main road.

"No, not that way," he said, as she turned in the direction of her home. She obeyed mechanically, and they walked on down the lane which led to Compton church.

"It's a chance in a million," said Fawcett; "it's made for us. It simplifies everything."

"It's absolutely impossible."

"Forget the world. Let the past be dead. There's nobody to consider; there's nobody in the world but ourselves."

She was devoutly thankful that they were out of doors, where he could use no other appeal but that of words. Her mind was made up, but she could not control her limbs. Even as she walked her body swayed to him like a flame in a draft.

He went on rapidly to explain how simple it was. Nobody need know anything till they were on the point of sailing. Then she could write to her husband. In a few months she would be free, and they could be married at the consulate. At the end of three years it would all be forgotten.

"I shall never be free to live with you," she said, like one repeating a lesson.

"Oh, that's ridiculous!" he said passionately; "you are sacrificing your whole future to a technicality."

"We've been through it all before."

"Yes, yes, I know; but I never thought an opportunity like this would come. It's thrust in our faces."

"Are we the sort of people to be ruled by opportunities?"

"Oh, I know all that," he said, with a tolerant movement of his hand as if to put the argument aside. "We've been fools. We've talked too much. We've talked ourselves blind to all reality. You've got to stop thinking. Take hold of my hands, shut your eyes and jump."

"No, I can't."

"This isn't strength, you know, it's weakness," he said, like one controlling a hysterical patient. "We've proved our strength. I grant all you say, everything; but there comes a point when holding out is a sort of moral pedantry. We've gone too far. Lives that have grown together like ours have must not be torn apart. It's a crime. I'm not superstitious, but we're flouting Providence. Such a chance will never happen again. As you know, I can't afford to choose where I shall go. For many years I shall have to take what turns up. Say that you'll come, Margaret!"

He gripped her arm above the elbow, but she tore it away.

"Oh, what is the use of discussing it?" she cried out passionately. "You only distress me and yourself. If it had been possible for me to agree do you think I would have bothered about an opportunity?"

"Upon my soul, I don't know what to think," he said bitterly. "I can only conclude that you don't care sufficiently. There must be some physical repulsion."

She made no comment upon that, and he went on:

"You go so far, you give me so much, and then you dash me down!"

"You must forgive me," she said humbly.

"I don't believe you know yourself why you refuse," he said, with more truth than either of them understood at the time. "It's a sort of obsession. Your will is paralyzed. I could swear that it isn't fear of public opinion, and you say that you don't care for him."

"I don't know how to put it more plainly than this," she said. "If I agreed to come with you there would be a part of me left out. There would be no peace for me any more."

He recognized that she was not to be shaken from her determination, and for a time they walked in silence. They had passed the old church and the rectory, and were now upon the lower road skirting the wood. Ahead of them the piers of the viaduct, already bending outward to the spring of

the arches, rose darkling against a clear-washed evening sky of golden green in which the crescent moon was faintly visible.

"What am I to do?" said Fawcett presently.

"Isn't it a little cruel to ask me that?" she replied. "You must do what you think best."

"There's no best to be considered," he said rather weakly. "It's only a question of relative advantage."

"I must say I hadn't thought of your going abroad. I suppose it would be to your interest to take the post?"

"Now more than ever," he said with perhaps unnecessary frankness. "I need something big to break my mind upon."

"To forget?" she said, with a faint smile.

"No, to prevent myself going to seed. It is not in my power to forget. I shall remember you with more intensity for having something that is worth doing."

"I like you to say that," she said, when she had considered it: "Well, then," she continued, and he appreciated the generosity that made her take upon herself to put his banishment into words, "I think you had better go."

CHAPTER XVI

COMING in from early celebration on a bright March morning, Margaret found the Dixon family assembled at breakfast as usual, but with a curious constraint in their manner. Immediately on her entrance Mary, who was a prim, straight-haired, pale-eyed little girl, jumped down from her chair and fetched Margaret's porridge from the fender as if she had been told to be kind to her poor auntie because she needed it. The reason for this unusual consideration was explained when Margaret took her place at the table and found a fat letter from Lisle staring up at her from beside her plate. She did not open it, but put it in her pocket and began her porridge with a remark upon the beauty of the morning. Although agitated and curious, she could not help feeling amused by the effect of the letter upon her relations. They so evidently looked upon its arrival as a warning that she had better be careful in her behavior, and they were kind to her as one is kind to a person under correction. Charles of-

fered her bacon sympathetically, and Mrs. Dixon, as if charitably determined to insist on her better nature, asked her who was in church.

"Mrs. Wakeling, Vera Hobday, Nurse Wynne and a blue tomtit," said Margaret, who, like many essentially religious people, was apt to speak of serious subjects in a frivolous manner. Mary glanced at her mother, and decided that she ought not to laugh.

Margaret made an unusually good breakfast, and talked cheerfully about the way things were coming on in the garden. The Dixons were very patient, though it was evident that they thought her rather affected for not opening the letter. They lingered over the meal, answering Margaret's flow of conversation in subdued monosyllables, and occasionally correcting Mary's all too perfect manners. Finally Mrs. Dixon rose with the gentle murmur, "Well, we'll leave you, Margaret," and told Mary to run along with her father into the garden, where he generally spent the half-hour or so until the trap was ready to drive him to Bristol looking for snails to give to the poultry.

In spite of all this careful provision for her enjoyment of the emotions a wife may be supposed to feel on hearing from her husband after more than

two years, Margaret took her letter into the workshop. She opened it with a blush and a flutter, and then her face lengthened. She glanced over the page, turned to the end, and still keeping her eyes on the paper, felt behind her for a chair, and sat down. Bewilderment, astonishment, and finally indignation passed over her features as she read:

"DEAR MARGARET:—It is difficult for me to express the mingled and poignant emotions which have delayed so long my answer to your letter. That in itself came so wonderfully and yet so naturally to fill my cup of happiness that I can not believe your being prompted to write it was a mere coincidence; and it is my profound conviction that your letter was ordained, which gives me courage, after long hesitation, to write to you as I do now.

"Only a false shame could prevent my speaking in the frankest terms of the wonderful things that have happened to me since our unhappy parting. I do not propose, however, to go into the real or imaginary difference between us which led up to my offense against you. Like most sinners, I suppose, I found plausible arguments to justify my sin. For a time I persuaded myself that I was happy in my sin. I took pleasure in the idea of lawlessness, I found a false inspiration in sensuality, but I did not find peace for my soul. In my defiance I would not recognize that I fought against the working of the Holy Spirit. The waning of my passion, the desertion of my friends, even the failure of my work, left me still hardened and rebellious. In this, my darkest hour, I met a man of whom no doubt

you have heard, Father Fabian Lester. I will not now trouble you with details, but when I look back upon the history of our acquaintance, I see in it a marvelous illustration of the mysterious workings of Divine Providence.

"At the risk of paining you, I must speak of the woman who came between us. I have parted from Laura Dacre. Whether she, like myself, began to suffer the inevitable torments of a soul apart from God, or whether from the first she loved me only with an impure passion which left no room for sacrifice, I can not say; but circumstances arose in which the tie between us came in conflict with her ambition. For more than a year we kept up a dreary mockery of affection, and finally, after a bitter scene, she left me—she passed out of my life.

"I will not pretend that I accepted the breach with resignation. Though my passion was dead, my pride was wounded; I did not understand that the humiliation was necessary to my soul's welfare. It was then that Father Fabian came to my help. He did not immediately try to influence me—indeed, I was not ready—but he showed me that, even in my rebellion, without my knowledge, I had been groping toward the light. Exactly when the illumination came I can not say, nor yet the nature of that illumination. 'It was not the common light which all flesh can see, nor was it greater, yet of the same kind, as if the light of day were to grow brighter and brighter and flood all space. It was not like this, but something altogether different from any earthly illumination.' Suddenly, yet in some marvelous way, as if I had known it all my life but had beat down the knowledge, I saw the truth: 'Thou hast created us unto Thyself, and our

heart finds no rest until it rests in Thee.' My will ceased to strive. Early in January I was received into the Catholic church. At last I found peace.

"It is not necessary for me to tell you how immediately my submission was rewarded even in a material sense. One blessing after another was showered upon me, and to crown it all came your most precious letter.

"You say that our marriage was a mistake. That, dear Margaret, I can not admit. By the clearer vision I see that you were always my good angel. I was led to love you by the higher choice of the soul which long remained obscured by evil passions. It was, I suppose, my inner and unconscious recognition of this that raised my anger against you; I fought against my love for you as I fought against the Holy Spirit. Now that the sensual mists have rolled away my love is triumphantly justified. The strength of it is proved by its survival.

"Margaret, in all humility, I ask you whether we can not take up our lives again together. It is the higher, the sacramental meaning of marriage, which you always held, that I have come to recognize. A great peace of soul, a passionless serenity, has fallen upon me. Will you not share it? I do not ask you to forgive my sin against you: I accept my punishment. All that I ask is that you shall live under my roof, to be about me always, inspiring, consoling with your dear presence. We should then at last be one in a sense that we never were before. The slight difference in the forms of our creeds would not divide us: we should eat of the same Body, drink of the same Blood.

"Do not decide hastily. If you agree to wipe out the past and come to me, you will find me greatly

changed—not only in a spiritual sense. I am not ill, but for certain reasons with which I need not bother you now it has become necessary for me to simplify my life. The hollowness of so much in human society, in the world, and in art has become apparent. My demands upon life are smaller. I am less greedy of experience. I find my inspiration from within. In my habits I have become almost a recluse. Few people visit me; Father Fabian only is my constant companion.

"Your letter tells me that you think of me without bitterness. Try to go a little further, and accept my love purified by suffering from all that could offend your nature.—I am, ever your husband,

"AUSTIN LISLE."

Margaret's first emotion was one of angry contempt. Throughout the letter she saw only a monstrous egotism. Why did he come bothering her with his affairs? What did she care about his life? In her haste she said that it was all an elaborate attempt to trade upon her sympathy, a canting tale to impress her. With a passionate movement she tore the three sheets of the letter across, but stopped in the act of tearing them again. A chance phrase caught her eye, and she read on down the page with closer attention to the actual wording. She was forced to admit that, granting the man as she knew him, there could be little doubt of his sincerity. However selfish, however unreasonable his request

that she should return to him, it was quite evident that he had repented of his past misconduct, and that his religion was not assumed for a purpose. That, indeed, was almost proved by his naive references to Father Fabian. He prided himself above all things on his independence of mind, and if he were pretending he would not have so transparently admitted that he had been influenced by another man. But whether he was sincere or not, he must be quickly disabused of the idea that she would ever consent to live with him again.

She went to her little writing-table in the corner of the workshop and took out some note-paper. While she hesitated over the form of address, Lizzie Matthews came in with a bunch of daffodils. At the sight of Margaret's white face, compressed lips and frowning brows the girl stopped short. Margaret put down her pen and looked at her watch; it was half past nine. In her excitement she had almost forgotten that the business of the day must go on. While she debated whether she should not give the girls a holiday in order to get the letter off her mind, Lizzie said gravely:

"Are you not well, Miss Margaret?"

"Yes, yes, Lizzie; I'm all right, thank you. I was only thinking," said Margaret, coming to herself.

She thrust away the dated note-paper, rose and helped Lizzie to arrange the daffodils in brown pitchers on the bench. Except when they spoke the two women might have been taken for sisters. In a few minutes Victoria Price's deep whistle was heard outside, and she entered jauntily, followed by the slight stooping figure of Phœbe Dando.

During the last few months a subtle change had crept into Margaret's relations with the girls. In all probability they were quite unaware of it, but she felt apologetic toward them. She felt that she was not being as good as her word, and yet she could not concentrate her attention or summon up energy to make a fresh beginning. The work in itself went on as usual, a sufficiency of orders came in and were executed; but Margaret could not help recognizing that so far as the chief intention of the business was concerned she was merely marking time. The girls had proved quite capable of carrying on the work as she started it, but they were entirely without initiative. They preferred to do as they were told. Margaret was only now beginning to understand what an immense amount of general preparation an uneducated person required for the intelligent practise of the simplest handicraft. She began to have uneasy doubts of the utility of the whole

thing, and half wished that she had never begun it. She feared that she had been led astray by the sentimental attractiveness of the "village industry" idea, a relic of the days when she was an art student and lost her head over William Morris and Ruskin. At the beginning she had found in the work a refuge from dulness and an interesting means of doing good in the world, but now that she had other things to think about, it was becoming rather a nuisance.

The consciousness of not doing her duty by the girls made her sensitive and on the lookout for some change in their manner toward her. Lizzie, she fancied, was gravely reproachful, Phœbe anxious, and Victoria indolently amused and inclined to take liberties. The comfortable sense of order, the fine confidence between them, was a little spoiled. With a vague idea that she really must begin to do something to wake things up, she asked them now if they knew of any other girls who would like to come into the workshop to be trained. No, they didn't; and Victoria took upon herself to say ill-temperedly:

"Us don't want no other girls. We're very comfortable as we be. Besides," she added pertinently, "there isn't too much to do as it is."

"For shame to speak to Miss Margaret like that!" said Lizzie; and her patient acceptance of the obvious truth that there was barely enough work to keep them going hurt Margaret more than Victoria's bluntness.

"Yes; but aren't we rather losing sight of what we set out to do?" she said, coloring slightly. "The chief idea was that of training, to help you and your friends to be independent and self-supporting."

"Don't you worry, Miss Margaret," said Victoria penitently; "we're all right."

Margaret did not care to say any more at the time, and went on with the drawing she was making for the design on the cover of a blotting-book. As soon as Fawcett was gone, she told herself, she would throw herself again heart and soul into the work. She would set up an embroidery frame, and make experiments with copper.

Meanwhile, she had her letter to think over. She began to understand that the reason why it had made her so angry was that it put her in the wrong; it robbed her of justification. So long as Lisle was engaged in a liaison with another woman she could hardly be blamed for seeking consolation in an innocent affection for another man. But now she and her husband had changed places. So far as

was humanly possible he had wiped out his offense; he had cut away the already dubious ground from under her feet. He had written to her in gladness, asking her to rejoice with him over his conversion. Putting all personal considerations on one side, as a religious woman she ought to be glad. In the abstract she was glad, but she knew that at the bottom of her heart she wished he had not broken with Laura Dacre.

As the morning passed she saw clearly how she was to answer his letter. She was glad now that Lizzie had interrupted her on the edge of an angry reply. That would have been absurd. Why should she show any feeling toward a man who had ceased to count in her life?

So in the half-hour's interval between the girls leaving and lunch time she wrote:

"DEAR AUSTIN:—Your letter surprised me a good deal. But for the concluding portion it would have given me nothing but pleasure. You must have entirely misunderstood the meaning of my letter. Perhaps I did not make myself quite clear; if so, I'm sorry. What you propose is absolutely impossible. In the first place, it is always a mistake to begin again when confidence has once been destroyed. Don't think me resentful; I have long ago forgiven you, as I hope you have forgiven me. We are not young enough to begin again. Our characters have

hardened. I have adapted myself to another way of living, and am happy and contented, as you seem to be. For every reason it would be a mistake to make a change now.—Yours"—she hesitated for a long time here, but thought that she might sincerely write the word—"affectionately, MARGARET."

At lunch Mrs. Dixon overwhelmed her with kindness, but asked no questions. Margaret knew that sooner or later something would be said about her letter, but she concluded that the duty would be thrust upon Charles. Now that she had posted her reply to Lisle's letter she had a curious feeling of recklessness. She had not seen Fawcett for three days, and suspected that he was avoiding her. They had parted amicably after her refusal to go with him to South America, but she feared that he thought her foolishly unreasonable, and probably doubted her sincerity. She wanted to conciliate him, and she thought that he would understand if she went to him and frankly admitted that he had been right in blaming her for writing to her husband. She would make him read Lisle's letter, and that would give him a clearer idea of her difficulties.

After lunch she spent an hour at the piano in the workshop, hoping that he might come to the dark-room, but he did not. At three o'clock she put on her hat and went out. For the first time in their ac-

quaintance she was deliberately seeking him. Reaching the bridge, she turned aside and threaded her way among sheds of corrugated iron and stacks of coal to Fawcett's little office. Two or three men stared at her curiously. Among them was Lizzie's father, a drunken violent-tempered man she cordially disliked. But she did not care who saw her now, and even derived a defiant pleasure from the thought that she was doing something unusual for a lady. Fawcett said sharply, "Come in!" when she tapped at the door, and he did not look round immediately when she opened it. He was standing before a tall sloping desk, with his pipe in his mouth. "Well, what is it?" he began, and then dropped his pipe with "Oh, Margaret!" in a tone of deep emotion and with a wave of red in his dark square-chinned face. Her defiant mood melted in a sudden shyness, and she stood just within the door, blushing and smiling. He advanced, took both her hands, and murmured in a tone of half-incredulous joy:

"But this is a day of days! You came here to me —to me?"

She nodded and released her hands, moving farther into the little room.

"I've something to show you," she said, unwilling

to destroy the pleasure of the moment by further explanation. She stood at the desk with one hand upon it, and looked curiously at the plans and drawings hanging upon the walls. Fawcett went to reach down his cap from a nail, and in passing bent over and pressed his lips upon the back of her hand.

"Well, I'm ready," he said, standing at the door for her to pass out.

She knew that he was right in not keeping her there, but she nevertheless felt a pang of disappointment at his turning her out so soon from the place that belonged to him.

"Shall we go out to the bluff?" he asked, as they picked their way over the metals upon the cinder-strewn ground.

She assented and he stopped to tell a foreman where he might be found if wanted. They said little until they reached the circle of pines. Here they seated themselves on the bank overlooking the valley.

"You were altogether right," she said. "I ought never to have written."

"He wants you to go back?" he said, glancing at her quickly.

"Yes. But there, you had better read what he says."

She gave him the three torn sheets of the letter, which he took without commenting on their condition, and sat a little apart with her hands clasped round her knees while he read them. She would not look at him, but she heard him laugh shortly and swear under his breath once or twice. When he had finished reading he said:

"Do you want me to say what I think?"

"Yes, please."

"Cant!" he said.

"No, it isn't cant," she said quickly, and with a gesture; "that's the worst of it. He's quite sincere."

"Well, you ought to know," he said, looking out moodily over the valley. "It's clever. Oh, it's damned clever."

She did not answer, and he said:

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you suppose?" she said a little sorely.

"I don't imagine that you are going to accept his invitation."

"No; I've written to tell him that whatever happens I'm not going back."

"I'm glad of that, at any rate."

They were silent for a few minutes, and then she said with a little laugh:

"I'm wondering, though, what happened to Miss Dacre. I should like to hear her story."

"Miss Dacre went to America."

"How do you know?" she said, looking at him curiously.

"Baines told me."

"How long ago?"

"Soon after I met you—in October."

"You did not tell me," she said, looking away.

"It was hardly my business, was it?"

"No, perhaps not," she admitted. "But you had a stronger reason than that."

"Well, I had," he said frankly. "I was afraid to—make what you can of that. I was a fool, I suppose, but when I came into your workshop that afternoon and found you—as I found you—I rather lost my sense of things. I did not play quite straight."

She drew in her breath sharply, but did not speak.

"You are angry with me?" he asked presently.

"No, not angry. I've no right to be angry. But," she continued sadly, "it shows, my dear, that you did not quite trust me. I wish I had known then. I should never have written if I had."

"I wish to God they had kept it up!' he said savagely.

"No, I can't wish that," she said. "Don't misunderstand me. Personally I don't care one way or the other, but I've no right to wish that any human beings continued in what I am obliged to regard as a sin."

He had nothing to say to that, and presently rose with the remark that he must be getting back to his work. They stood side by side, and before he gave her back the letter he looked at it again.

"I wonder whether he guesses," he said, "whether anybody has told him?"

"About you?" She reflected for a moment before she put the letter into her pocket, and then said, "No, that's impossible—or next to impossible. What makes you think that?"

"It's so damnably clever. He cuts away the ground from under our feet."

"You mean by coming round—by putting us in the wrong?"

He shook his head.

"I don't see any wrong about it. No; what I meant was that by joining the Roman church he makes it impossible for us ever to marry. Supposing you had cared enough to give him his opportunity, his precious creed wouldn't allow him to divorce you."

"Oh!" she said vaguely.

"That is so, isn't it?" he asked, looking at her in surprise.

"Yes, I suppose so," she said, flushing slightly. "I don't think that would have occurred to me, though. It's not important."

"It's the only thing that would have made me hesitate," he said grimly, and moving on.

"What an odd idea!' she murmured.

"You think so? Well, we've the satisfaction of knowing that it can't affect us, anyhow. We've accepted our fates."

She felt that they were at a really serious misunderstanding, but she could not speak as frankly as she wished. What she wanted to say was:

"You strangely misjudge me. If I had agreed to go with you to South America, it would not have been because I wanted to marry you." She wanted to turn the tables on him, to point out that it was he who was regarding a mere technicality. She had the odd feeling that he had ever so little repulsed her; she felt the pursuer, and that made her ashamed.

"Yes, we've accepted our fates," she said hurriedly, with heightened color, "and there's no need

to discuss what complications might have arisen if we hadn't. But don't let us be ungenerous to him. It's quite certain he knows nothing. And if he did," she was tempted to say, "he would have known me better than to imagine that any consideration of that sort would stop me." But continued, "He wouldn't have done that. He isn't mean. Besides, his religion is quite sincere. He always was really a religious man; he never had any convictions the other way. I'm thoroughly glad to hear of his joining the church, not only on general principles, but because he'll be more contented. Not everybody, you know, can invent a consistent creed of their own—can build viaducts." Allowing time for the little stab to smart, she added, "There are things in the letter that puzzle me, though. What does he mean by saying that his demands upon life are smaller?"

"I think I know what he means by that," said Fawcett with a short laugh.

"What, then?"

"He doesn't want to frighten you off. He's wary. He would first of all get you into his house, play the unworthy husband, claim nothing. Treat you as a woman to be laid siege to, to be won pa-

tiently over again. Oh, I can very well imagine how he'd set about it," said Fawcett disgustedly, and kicking a stone out of his path.

That did not seem to her to be the true explanation, but she had nothing better to offer. They said good-by at the bridge—he with depressed preoccupation, and she with a shyness she had never before felt in his company.

As Margaret had expected, Charles plucked up courage to question her that night. He waited until his wife had gone to bed, and then said airily:

"So you heard from Lisle to-day?"

"Yes," said Margaret. "He's reformed; he wants me to go back."

"But Miss What's-her-name?"

"She's left him and gone to America."

Even Charles was surprised, but he looked pleased nevertheless.

"What are you going to say?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, I've said it. I've told him it is absolutely impossible."

His face fell, and he said:

"Well, you know best. But, Margaret, is it altogether right to be so unforgiving?"

"Bless you," she said, helping herself to a biscuit, "I've forgiven him long ago."

"Then, upon my word, I don't see why you—"

"Don't you? I'm quite happy as I am—if you'll put up with me."

"Oh, of course, of course," he said confusedly. "I didn't mean that. We hope that you'll stay with us to the end of your days."

She knew that he meant it, and that his only reason for wishing her to go back to her husband was his extraordinary notion of the right thing. She rubbed the top of his head affectionately, and he said:

"I wish you'd been able to get a divorce."

"Why?"

"It's such an unsatisfactory position. You're a young woman," said Charles, reddening.

"Well, as you know, I couldn't," she said cheerfully.

He looked at the door, turned to her with an air of extreme knowingness, and said impressively, "If you'd consulted me at the time I believe we could have pulled it off. The tendency of the law to-day is all in the direction of removing feminine disabilities. I've no doubt we could have made out a case of technical cruelty."

"It's too late now," she said gravely, though she was heartily amused by this eruption of the lawyer;

"and anyhow it doesn't make any difference to me."

He sat for a moment, whistling out of tune, and then said casually:

"Seen Fawcett to-day?"

"Yes," said Margaret.

"He won't be here much longer."

"No."

There was a heavy silence, and then Margaret said mischievously:

"Perhaps I'd better go, after all."

"Now, my dear girl, don't talk nonsense!" said Charles, coloring furiously. "It's merely a matter of discretion. These old women will talk. Heaven knows," he added, as one who submits to respectability only under compulsion, "I don't want to interfere with your amusements."

"Good night," said Margaret gravely.

CHAPTER XVII

LISLE did not answer her letter. She tried to think of him as a man to whom she was perfectly indifferent, but in the result he appealed to her more and more strongly as the man who made her own position morally indefensible. She was angry with him for not writing earlier in the first place. If his letter had come before Fawcett had asked her to go to South America with him, she was not quite sure that she would have refused to go. At any rate, she would have made her decision on different grounds. She felt that she had been asked to decide without knowing all the circumstances. But then, again, it occurred to her that if the letter had come Fawcett might not have asked her. Evidently for him the really important thing in the letter was the point that she could never be his legal wife so long as Lisle was alive. She was not conscious that she was any nearer now to consenting to elope with him, but she felt that it was highly important that he should be made to understand that

that was not the reason why she refused to do so. Fawcett, however, did not give her the opportunity to explain, and she could hardly reopen the subject herself. That made her very angry with Fawcett, and she declared in her heart that he was sulking.

The truth of the matter was that, having accepted her refusal, Fawcett was determined not to compromise her if he could help it. Without deliberately avoiding her, he contrived that they should meet as far as possible only under circumstances to which no reasonable person could take exception. With this end in view he welcomed the appearance of Paul Dixon when he came home for his Easter holidays, which fell toward the end of April. Naturally the boy spent a great deal of time in his company, but to Fawcett's chagrin Margaret refused to take advantage of the obvious opportunity. Paul at once noticed that something was wrong, and innocently asked:

"Have you and Mr. Fawcett had a row, Aunt Margaret?"

"Not that I know of," she said sarcastically. "You'd better ask Mr. Fawcett."

He did, and Fawcett came to her in the workshop in a towering rage.

"You are deliberately cruel," he said; "I don't

understand you, unless you have all along meant to play with me. I declare, if Thompson could come I would clear out to-morrow."

She took a perverse delight in seeing him roused.

"It's unfortunate you have to stay," she said, "but it will only be for another month or so."

"Well, it doesn't seem much use my staying," he retorted, "seeing how we're fixed."

"Am I to understand, then," she said coolly, "that you have lost all interest in me since I refused to run away with you?"

"You know that's untrue," he said, controlling his temper, "but you won't make use of what opportunities we have of meeting."

"Oh, you can't expect me to take the same interest in steam-engines that Paul does."

"Damn steam-engines!" he said. "I want to see you."

"Well," she said, "I've never put any obstacles in the way of that, have I? Only," she added, as he turned away, "I've told you before that I don't like pretexts for perfectly harmless conduct."

But when he had left the workshop she flung herself on the little bed and cried for half an hour. Almost for the first time in her life she did not know what she wanted, and she felt as if she had a griev-

ance against all the world. Even in her religion she found no consolation. She was too honest to pretend now that a love which aroused in her such hard and bitter thoughts against her husband could be innocent. She could not reconcile with her own faith a regret that he had come to share it. The spiritual center of her life was disturbed, and though she kept up the habit of devotion with superstitious energy, this Eastertide, coming as it did late in the spring to a warmed and smiling world, was for her made miserable by the feeling that she was playing the hypocrite. She said in her heart that it had been better to sin outright and stifle the voice of conscience than thus to live in the sense of sin with none of its material advantages.

Everything conspired with the spring to remind her that she was being left behind in the progress to fulfilment. Willie Hobday had come down for Easter, bringing his friend, young Lord Bretforton, who immediately lost his heart to Vera. He made Margaret his confidante, and begged her to plead his cause. At present Vera, who was three years his senior, only laughed at him.

"I can't take him seriously," she said to Margaret; "he's such a child. And, besides, it's so absurdly what happens in story books."

Margaret thought that if she had no stronger reasons than that the young man need not despair, particularly since he declared that his father, to whom Vera's parents referred him, would raise no opposition. Bretforton, who was a charming boy of twenty, with fair curly hair and the complexion and hands of a girl, was known to his intimates as "Bubbles." He and Willie Hobday had already collaborated in an extravagantly successful nonsense-book for children, and were now at work upon another. Willie composed the verses, and Bretforton, who for all his shyness was a brilliant caricaturist, drew the pictures. Both the young men were passionate admirers of Lisle's poems, and with the tactlessness of enthusiastic youth they quoted the contents of his last volume until Margaret was sick of hearing them. They knew her history, but they were at an age when mental qualities are the only things that matter, and they evidently considered that a woman privileged to be the wife of such a man ought to be prepared to put up with anything. Margaret could not be angry with them for passing her the high compliment of taking her generosity for granted. Indeed, as she well knew, if Lisle had only continued to supply her with reasonable grounds for complaint, she could have shared their

wholehearted enthusiasm for his work without a bitter thought. Again and again she was reminded that it was her husband's reformation that injured her.

The young men went back to Oxford with Bretforton's wooing not forbidden, but suspended for better acquaintance; and after the ten days or so of high-pitched gaiety which had taken Margaret a little out of herself, she was left with her sense of failure now intensified by the apparent coldness of her lover. To add to her unhappiness, Mrs. Dixon's unspoken disapproval of her conduct took the form of keeping Mary out of her way, as if her touch were pollution. Margaret, who, in spite of the child's quaint priggishness, had a great affection for her, was cut to the heart. She felt sure that her sister-in-law did not really believe her guilty of wrong-doing. Her intimacy with Fawcett was only the finishing touch to a long series of misunderstandings. Just as the moral nature of the negro is said to break down under too sudden contact with even the virtues of the white races, so under the irritation of a dozen things that she did not understand, Margaret's marriage, her separation from her husband, Mr. Wakeling's ritualism, Mrs. Wakeling's cigarettes and nudities, the coming of the railway,

and the intrusion of the tradespeople into ancestral homes—even the incredible combination of youth, good looks, and efficiency in the village nurse—Mrs. Dixon's narrow and muddled brain conceived a monstrous bogy and labeled it "Bad influence." It was fear that made her unkind and unjust.

With the passing of the first weeks of May, Margaret was filled with a desperate desire at all costs to make the most of them. She could not afford to waste these precious days in keeping up her dignity, and she turned again to Fawcett with an unconditional humility that anguished him. It struck her with amazing force how completely she had taken him on trust, how little she really knew about him, and she now began to question him about his life and aims, as if with the pathetic determination to keep and frame as complete a picture as possible. Beyond the fact that both his parents were dead, that his father had been a doctor, and that it was from his mother that he got his love of music, he had not much to tell her about his past. Nor did his past seem to matter; all his interests were in the future.

On a glowing evening in the last week of May they went for the first walk they had taken together with no secondary purpose but each other's com-

pany. Both were a little self-conscious, as if they were thinking of the future they might have shared together. So they might have walked as husband and wife. For some distance their way kept them in sight of the line, which was now taking its final appearance as part of the landscape. The cutting had reached the level of the permanent way, the embankment was finished and already covered with a film of green, as if by the mercy of nature. In a little while the army of navvies would strike their iron camp and disappear, the noise and bustle of construction would be forgotten, and everything would be as it was before, except that Compton would have become a definite link in a chain "bringing Ireland nearer and eventually America," as Fawcett had said.

"Aren't you sorry you can't stay and see it finished?" said Margaret.

"Not very," he said. "I've done my share. Thompson will see it through."

"But there will be nothing to mark your share; nothing that you can point to and say, 'That's mine.'"

"That doesn't worry me," he said with a laugh. "We don't look at our work quite like that. It's different from a man writing a book or painting a pic-

ture. The individual doesn't count. There will be nothing to show, for example, that two poor fellows have lost their lives on this section. Of course," he added, "one has the satisfaction of knowing that if one has done one's work well it will be remembered when one is looking out for another job."

The point of view interested her, and she said:

"But is your whole life to be nothing more than a succession of jobs, as you call them?"

"Oh, no; but for a man without money the jobs are the only possible means to the end."

"And what's the end?"

"Research in my case."

The word naturally conveyed only a vague idea to her, and she said:

"So as to be able to invent things?"

"Not exactly. Inventions are the things that you make out of the chips in your spare time."

Seeing that she was puzzled, he tried to explain his meaning more clearly.

"It's the discovery of principles that I'm keen about. I'm convinced, as I think I told you, that the future of mechanics lies in a better understanding of materials and the forces they contain—represent is perhaps a better word—rather than in more elaborate machinery. It isn't a new idea. It may

sound fantastic, but I can't help feeling that the classical stories about nymphs and dryads, spirits locked up in trees and stones, were intuitive anticipations of this truth. We've got to coax out the spirits—play Prospero to their Ariel, so to speak—and the first step is to try to understand the nature of things. As I said, we're getting more humble, more tactful. A steam-engine, for example, is brutal and arbitrary compared with a dynamo."

She brought him back to the personal question by asking:

"Then how will you set about discovering principles?"

"First of all I shall build a big laboratory and an experimental workshop—where things will be made to be broken up again."

"But that will need a lot of money, won't it?"

"I shall get it," he said simply.

His calm certainty, so far removed from boastfulness, gave her a vivid light upon his character. He knew what he could do, and he also knew what he could not do. Wasn't there a little danger that he drew too sharp a line between the possible and the impossible? That was a likely defect in such a temperament. It came out in so many ways: in his lack of a religious belief, in his refusal

to take the trouble to conciliate people, in his immediate acceptance of definite ideas. She thought of his remark, "I take off my hat to an idea, even though I think it is nonsense." Now that she herself was proved inconsistent, she was a little sick of ideas. She saw where the reflection was leading her and grew frightened.

"So," she said, "except for the purpose of making money, you look upon this—and the railway in South America, for example—as so much time wasted in relation to your real purpose in life?"

"By no means. It's all experience, all preparation. Whether it is a railway, or a dock, or a waterworks, or only a road, one is always learning something fresh about materials. Spenter began as a civil engineer," he added after a pause.

She laughed at his naive confession of hero worship, and he said good-humoredly: "Oh, yes, I know it's the fashion to sneer. Of course, he came to some conclusions that won't hold water, but we're only just beginning to understand how big he was."

"I've often thought that I should like to study science," she said, with apparent irrelevance.

It was his turn to laugh at her large generality. She perhaps misunderstood his amusement, for she said in rather an injured tone:

"Well, women do take up science. There is Madame Curie, for example."

"Oh, yes," he admitted; "there are certain kinds of scientific work that women can do as well as or even better than men."

"What sort of work?"

"Laboratory work that requires patient observation and the collection of data."

He gave her concrete instances of what he meant. Margaret could see herself perfectly in the picture, and she took a melancholy pleasure in thinking how very reasonable, in his words, was the future she was giving up. In spite of her ignorance, she had grasped the fundamental difference between the life of the artist and that of the man of science. The former required at all costs a jealous preservation of the individual; nobody could share his work. The only practical help that the wife of an artist could give him was to protect his individuality. When she married Lisle she had thought to share in his artistic life, and the beginning of the differences between them was her sense of injury under the discovery that she could not. She was quite willing now to admit that she had been unreasonable to expect it. But, as Fawcett had pointed out, the worker in any branch of science must necessarily

sacrifice his individuality to the work; and consequently there was no field of research, however exalted, however abstruse, in which there was not room for the loyal comrade. In speaking of the good laboratory work done by women, Fawcett mentioned Baines.

"Have you heard from Doctor Baines lately?" she asked him.

He laughed awkwardly and said:

"Not for some time."

"I thought you were friends?"

"So we are," he said, "but we had a difference of opinion. Probably I was in the wrong."

He had not written to Baines since the latter had given him his impression of Lisle, and he was now ashamed of the irritation Baines' letter had caused him. Apparently Baines had made an accurate diagnosis of Lisle's character.

"It's a pity to give up one's friends," said Margaret.

"Oh, we haven't quarreled!" he said hastily. "I shall go to see Baines when I get back to town."

They walked a few steps in silence, and then Margaret said:

"I think I should like to know Doctor Baines. I wonder if I shall ever meet him."

"Who knows?" said Fawcett. "The world is a small place."

She thought of the seven thousand miles that presently would be between them, and began to question him about life in the Argentine. He had only the letters of his mining friend and what he had read about the country to go upon, but he was able to present a picture to her imagination. She spoke of the charm of living in the wilds, close to nature. He admitted that there were certain advantages in getting away from civilization and being thrown on one's own resources, but said:

"There seems to me a good deal of false sentiment talked about nature. I can't understand a conception of nature that doesn't include the city as well as the wren's nest. Of course, London and Bristol are filthy holes; but that is not because they have gone too far, but because they have not gone far enough. When you consider the immense time it has probably taken the wren to perfect her little dwelling, it doesn't seem surprising that the habitations of a comparatively new and complicated creature like man are still in the experimental and ill-adapted stage. We shall only get closer to nature by pushing on to our proper place, which is no more

that of the naked savage than it is that of the wren or the ichthyosaurus."

Margaret reflected with sad amusement that his being able to talk like that within a week of their parting, probably forever, proved that he would soon get over his disappointment. She was interested in what he said, but she wanted now to talk about themselves; and she did not understand that for him there was nothing to be said on that subject except in the language of passion, which she had tacitly forbidden. At the same time she could not help feeling that he obeyed her perhaps too literally.

"When shall you write?" she asked in a low voice.

"As soon as I land."

"Not before?" she exclaimed in a tone of acute disappointment.

"What is the good?" he said desperately. "What is there to say? You won't come with me; we can't marry—"

"Certainly, we can't marry," she said hastily, "but you might write to me from London." A spice of cruelty caused her to add, "I want to hear all about Doctor Baines."

He was troubled and embarrassed; he did not

understand her mood. For himself the only thing that mattered was her immediate presence here in the gathering May night which brought them so near together. Since he could not take her in his arms, they might as well talk about abstractions as anything else, or better, keep silence. They had turned back, and were now on the lower road, approaching one of the immense piers of the viaduct, which towered up out of the descending wood on their left, blotting out the stars. When they reached it they stood for a moment looking up. The footsteps of two men, who for some time had been behind them on the road, came nearer. Apparently one of the men was the worse for drink and quarrelsome.

"Let them pass," said Fawcett.

Margaret instinctively drew back into the shadow. As the men approached, she recognized the voice of Lizzie's father in that of the drunkard, who was being helped along by his companion.

"Goo' night," said Matthews aggressively, as he passed the engineer standing in the road.

"Goo' night," said Fawcett.

At the sound of his voice Matthews stopped short with "Hullo!" and peered into the shadow. His friend, who himself was far from sober, tried to

persuade him to come along, and there was a little scuffle.

"Lemme be," said Matthews; "I want to light my pipe."

He stood fumbling, and then there was the sudden flare of a match. It went out immediately, but the momentary illumination had vaguely revealed Margaret's figure in the corner between the hedge and the pier. Matthews laughed coarsely, but before he could strike another match his companion got hold of him and led him away, grumbling and cursing. As their figures blended with the night their voices kept up a sort of litany:

"I tell 'e 'twas."

"I tell 'e 'twasn't."

For the moment Margaret was annoyed that she had seemed to be hiding, and she wished that she had stood out in the road. She did not speak, but Fawcett felt her vexation, and said lightly:

"I don't think they saw who you were."

"No, perhaps not," she said; "but they knew you."

"It doesn't matter, does it?" he asked, rather reproachfully.

"Oh, no, of course it doesn't matter," she said, moving on; "but I dislike that man Matthews."

"He was too drunk to notice. And anyhow he will have forgotten by to-morrow," said Fawcett.

Margaret said no more, and by the time they reached the Dixons' the incident had passed from her mind.

"Won't you come in?" she said to Fawcett as they stood by the gate.

"No, I don't think I will to-night. It's nearly half past ten," he said. "I'll come in to-morrow evening to say good-by to your people. Thompson comes down the next day, and I shall be busy with him until I go on Thursday."

"Very well," said Margaret, and bade him good night.

The next morning Lizzie Matthews did not come to the workshop. Margaret's mind immediately connected her absence with the incident of the previous night, though she tried to dismiss the idea as ridiculous. Neither of the other girls knew why Lizzie had not come, but Victoria's manner, when Margaret questioned her, struck her as peculiar. They went on with their work as usual, but at half past twelve, when the two girls were leaving, Margaret called Victoria back, and said:

"Why didn't Lizzie come this morning?"

Victoria looked very uncomfortable and muttered:

"You'd best ask her, Miss Margaret."

"Please tell me, Victoria," said Margaret, turning pale; and the girl blurted out:

"Her father gave her a hiding last night. He bruised her face awful."

"The beast!" cried Margaret. "But why was that?"

Victoria looked as if she didn't know whether to laugh or to cry, and finally said:

"He catched her with a young man."

"Lizzie!" said Margaret incredulously. "What man?"

"I don't know, miss," said Victoria, in an agony of embarrassment unusual in her; "but you'd best ask her."

The story sounded improbable, and Victoria's curious reluctance to talk about it filled Margaret with vague uneasiness. Immediately after lunch she went down to the untidy hamlet on the banks of the stream where Matthews lived. The inhabitants of this quarter, which was known as "Under the Hill," were mostly quarrymen, and almost a separate race. Until recently, and but for the in-

fluence of Mr. Wakeling, a lady could not have gone among them without insult. As it was, women gossiping at their doors looked at Margaret resentfully, and passed remarks upon her appearance as she picked her way among the pigs, ducks and dirty children promiscuously occupied with the mud. She hoped to find Lizzie alone. Her father would be at work upon the line, and as likely as not her mother would have driven into Bristol on one of her vague errands in a "spring cart," which was the popular symbol rather than the means of lawful employment in this neighborhood. Margaret knocked at the door of the Matthews' cottage, and receiving no answer, tried the latch. The door was locked. Instinctively sure that Lizzie was within, she put her mouth to the door, and said:

"It's I, Lizzie—Margaret."

A chair was pushed back on the flagged floor within, and Lizzie unlocked and opened the door. Her left cheek was discolored with a frightful bruise. She was wearing a dress of Margaret's, and already a nightmare explanation of the story flashed into Margaret's mind.

"Oh, Lizzie," she panted, as soon as they were within the clean and tidy kitchen, "what has happened?"

"Nothing, miss," faltered the girl.

"But you must tell me, Lizzie," Margaret insisted.

"There's no harm done," said Lizzie firmly, even stubbornly.

Margaret went forward and took her in her arms. The girl struggled for a moment, and then began to cry.

"Your father saw us?" Margaret murmured in her ear.

"Oh, he come home and said filthy things about you!" wailed the girl.

"Yes, yes," said Margaret, shaking her gently.

"And—and I said you couldn't have been with Mr. Fawcett because I was. And then," she added simply, "he hit me down."

"Oh, why did you do that, Lizzie?" cried Margaret. "What was the good of it, you dear foolish girl?"

"He believed it!" she said triumphantly. "I've disgraced him once. It shut him up."

"But the other man?"

"He said all along it wasn't you. They near fought about it before they got home."

"But where were you really, Lizzie?"

"Me and Victoria walked over to see her aunt at

Piers Barton," said Lizzie, drying her eyes. "Us didn't get back till half after ten."

"Then Victoria knows?" said Margaret wonderingly.

"I slipped up first thing this morning and told she. Don't you fret, Miss Margaret. It's all right. Victoria'll cut her throat rather than talk about you or let anybody else."

"Oh, I'm not thinking about that," said Margaret wildly, the tears flooding her eyes. "Of course I was with Mr. Fawcett, and I don't care who knows it!"

Lizzie picked up the small pair of trousers that she had been mending for a younger brother, and made an attempt to go on with her work. Margaret tried to think consecutively, but felt that she was losing her head. As she said, she did not care who talked about her, but she shrank from telling Lizzie that her impulsive act of generosity must in all probability not only ludicrously fail of its purpose, but spread the gossip. Out of her confused attempts to see things in clear outlines there sprang into being a vivid picture of danger to Fawcett.

"Oh," she cried, clutching Lizzie by the shoulders, "your father will harm him!"

"Not he," said Lizzie scornfully; "he dursn't touch a man."

"Not openly, perhaps—but in some treacherous way."

"Why should he?" said Lizzie, opening her eyes wider. "It's allus the woman's fault."

The sad philosophy of the remark, lighting up an abyss of patiently borne injustice, coming from this girl who had fallen and suffered and still kept her sweetness and purity of heart, broke down the remains of Margaret's self-control. It was Lizzie who supported her now. She bowed her head on the girl's shoulder, and cried helplessly.

"Don't 'ee, miss, don't 'ee!" said Lizzie, stroking her head with a hand that had caught the trick of maternity.

"You know, Lizzie?" gasped Margaret.

"Long ago," said Lizzie; "and so did Victoria. Phœbe doesn't, because she's soft. But we've never said nothing to nobody—not even to each other—not till this morning."

And these were the girls, thought Margaret, whom she had been afraid to desert lest they succumb to their surroundings. She had trimmed and shaped her conduct on a course that was neither

right nor wrong, because she owed them an example. She had not even deceived them, and yet they had been as loyal to her as if she had been a saint from Heaven. In a revulsion of self-contempt she said agitatedly:

"If I want you at any time, Lizzie, and write to you, you will come?"

"Yes, miss."

"Don't call me that!" said Margaret passionately. "Call me Margaret. I can't tell you more now," she continued; "I don't know myself what I'm going to do." She had nearly added, "I must think," but she knew now that she had already thought too much. She was done with thinking.

She sat for a few minutes trying to talk calmly, but every time Margaret caught sight of Lizzie's cruelly marked face her voice broke in a sob. "It'll be all right in a day or two," said Lizzie, who apparently took her beating as the natural and proper consequence of her admission. Finally Margaret jumped up, kissed Lizzie passionately mouth to mouth, and left the cottage.

Her one instinct was to get to Fawcett as quickly as possible, and tell him the whole story. In spite of Lizzie's assurance, she did not feel convinced

of his safety from Matthews. She hurried to his little office, but he was not there. With the exception of the men working in the forge, nobody was about. She walked along the deserted cutting out on to the embankment, and met him coming back from the viaduct, where men were clustered round a steam crane like a swarm of bees. At the sight of her tear-stained and agitated face his own lit up, and he ran forward with a glad exclamation.

"Wait," she said—"wait. I've something to tell you first."

"Thank God for that 'first'!" he said, with a great laugh.

They took hands, and like two children, ran down the embankment into the field at the bottom. In a few rapid sentences she told him the story.

"Yes, yes," he said, interrupting her with perhaps pardonable impatience; "and you're coming?"

"I don't deserve—"

"You're coming!" he cried, like a great schoolboy. Less than their exposed position his own emotion restrained him from touching her; but she saw him shake from head to foot with the effort.

"With all my heart," she said; "and you're to forget everything I've ever said."

And then, as if reminded, he suddenly whitened.

"I've no right—" he began miserably. She saw what was in his mind, and stopped him, saying earnestly:

"Doesn't the fact that we both forgot all about that prove that it doesn't really matter?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE moment they were secure from observation, with one impulse they clung together, and sealed their compact with a long kiss; but immediately fell apart, since they had all their lives before them for kisses, and in the immediate present much to consider with clear heads. Fawcett urged her to go with him to London the next day but one, or to follow him immediately afterward, but she felt that it would be better to wait, and said:

"I'm not running away; we're not doing anything disgraceful, and I hate even to seem afraid. Besides," she added, "a woman can't start for the tropics without some preparation. You'll be in London a week?"

"I sail on Saturday."

"We sail on Saturday," she corrected him. "Very well. I can get most of the things I want in Bristol, and have them sent on to you. I shall

probably go up about Thursday, but I shan't come to you till the very day."

"I don't like it," he said, looking disturbed; "I don't like it. You'd much better come at once."

"You know how I'd love to," shé murmured, with a glance that thrilled him, "but something tells me that my plan is best. We're doing this deliberately, and there's no reason at all why I should not leave things as straight as possible behind me. By the way," she added with some anxiety, "I want Lizzie to come."

For the moment he looked rueful, and she said:

"Dear, I know it's unreasonable, but I simply can't leave her after this. She's more than my sister—think of what we owe her! She needn't be a bother. I have a little money of my own, you know."

"Oh, my dear girl, of course I wasn't thinking of that," he said, flushing, and clutching her arm. After a moment's reflection, he continued: "On second thoughts I don't know that it isn't rather a good idea. We shall have to rough it, you know, and there will be times when I shall have to leave you for days together, and then you'll be glad of a companion."

"Rough it," she delightedly murmured under her

breath, "roughing it with you! Indeed," she added, her voice breaking, "there are no thanks that I can give you for letting her come."

"But how will you manage?" he said, cutting short her gratitude. "You'll not tell Lizzie beforehand?"

"Oh, dear, no!" she said, her wet eyes shining as she matured the plan. "I shall take Lizzie up to town on Thursday—she's never been—to see the sights! Nobody will even wonder. The fun of having Lizzie there, and taking her about, will help the time to pass quickly till Saturday. I shan't tell her till the last possible moment. I don't think she'll be very surprised," she added naively.

She only then recognized that she must have made up her mind at the moment in which she had asked Lizzie to come to her if she wrote, and that in the end she had almost flung herself at him; but the recognition made her not ashamed, but proud. The tragic possibility that he might not have been ready gave her only a delicious thrill, now that it was safely behind her, and she involuntarily looked back along the road they had come as if at a dangerous crossing she had dared triumphantly.

"What are you laughing at?" he said.

"No, indeed, I'll not tell you now," she said in

confusion, though glad that he already claimed as a right to share her thoughts.

"Some day, then?"

"Perhaps some day, when you want an excuse for leaving me in the lurch."

"I shan't worry," he said laconically.

He asked her a few more questions about her plans, and seeing that she had made up her mind that her way was the best, reluctantly consented to leave her behind him.

"Remember that we've got to keep it up," she said at parting. "Nothing can make any difference now, but I don't want any uncomfortable scenes if they can be avoided."

They kept it up so successfully during the remaining two days before his departure that the Dixons' innate sentimentality got the better of their passion for propriety, and they were a little shocked at Margaret's hardness. On Wednesday evening Fawcett came to dinner, and afterward there was music. Margaret played the liveliest tunes, but Charles sang *Excelsior* in his husky tenor, with special meaning in the lines—

> " 'Oh, stay!' the maiden cried, 'and rest
> Thy weary head upon this breast.' "

And after much persuasion Polly very prettily warbled a ballad of the eighties called *The Last Waltz*. Afterward, when Charles was unbuttoning his waistcoat in the bedroom, he told his wife that he had never before felt so keenly the pathos of the lines—

"You in the light,
I in the night
Out on the raging sea."

And Polly said sleepily:

"Poor fellow! I hope he'll have a good passage."

They were a little surprised in the morning when Margaret declined Charles' invitation to drive with him to Bristol, so that she might see Fawcett off at the station; but, as Mrs. Dixon said:

"Perhaps it's better so. Certainly, if I were in her place, I should like nothing to spoil the memory of last night."

"I wonder if she really cares," said Charles, with a critical eye to the pony's harness.

"I'm sure she does," said his wife, tiptoeing to kiss him good-by. "Margaret is like you; she does not show her feelings."

Fawcett's headquarters in London were in a

large gloomy building in the neighborhood of Chancery Lane, inhabited chiefly by lawyers and minor stars in the world of company promotion, where he had three rooms on the first floor. The two days after his arrival were entirely taken up in private and official preparations for his journey to South America. He had to pay several visits to the Argentine legation, and he arranged for a daily Berlitz lesson for the improvement of his Spanish. Having fixed an appointment with Baines by telephone, he drove to Wimpole Street on the Sunday afternoon. The events of his last few days at Compton had given Baines a new importance to his mind, and he looked forward to the meeting with suppressed excitement. His friendship with the doctor was an old and easy affair, dating from their school-days at Westminster, based upon some deep-seated liking, and consequently depending little upon frequency of intercourse or even of communication. They belonged to the same club, and when Fawcett was in town they were constantly meeting. Point was given to their common interest in science by the difference in their professions; each supplemented the other's special knowledge in the happiest way.

As his horse's hoofs disturbed the Sunday

quiet of Oxford Street, Fawcett wondered whether Baines had kept up his acquaintance with Lisle; whether, in fact, he had become a friend of the poet, and if so, how the friendship would affect their own in the future. Now that his relations with Margaret were made secure, he could feel nothing but a half-incredulous contempt for the puerile irritation that had kept him from writing to Baines for further information about his acquaintance with Lisle. Baines might have told him a great deal that would be useful. Their correspondence was ordinarily so irregular that Baines would think nothing of his silence. He would be unaware of the soreness which had caused it, but the mere fact that the soreness had existed, and the uncertainty of their future terms, gave the occasion a quite emotional character. There was also a certain piquancy in going to see the man who might possibly have become the intimate friend of Margaret's husband.

Fawcett sincerely hoped that Baines had not become Lisle's friend, and he reflected rather sadly how almost impossible it is for a friendship between two men to continue quite the same when one of them has formed a connection with a woman by marriage or otherwise. He did not know what

Baines' social prejudices might be, but he concluded that, theoretically, at least, he would entirely sympathize with the step he was taking. No broad-minded man could fail to do so. He did not, of course, intend to tell Baines about it now, but he wanted some guidance for the future, and this he hoped to gain from general conversation. There was a practical reason for this. Baines' tastes and profession, unlike his own, brought him in contact with a great many women, and he wanted to learn how far Margaret would be deprived of feminine society when they returned to England. In three years the details of her flight would be almost forgotten, but her position would still be irregular unless Lisle died in the interval, which was unlikely. It was not surprising, then, that he followed the grave servant up-stairs to Baines' sitting-room with a feeling of slightly agitated expectancy.

The quiet greeting between the two men, "Well, Baines!" "Well, Fawcett!" indicated the comfortable terms of their friendship at present. They made an effective contrast as of the indoor and outdoor worker, though both had a curious common likeness in their steady eyes, alert undemonstrative manner, and direct though unhurried movements.

Baines was the taller by half a head. He was also two years older than Fawcett, but the engineer's more forcible dealings with men and habit of giving orders had made him the more obviously self-reliant, creating the impression, perhaps illusory, that he had had greater experience of the world. Baines' comparatively pale face and slight frame and his watchful ease gave him something of the character of the dilettante; he looked more intellectual, but less masculine than his friend, whose open-air color and sturdy frame were accentuated by his gray town clothes. The doctor's observation made him aware now that Fawcett had aged more during the nine months or so since he had last seen him than could be explained by the wear and tear of his profession. Though he was, of course, completely in the dark as to how Fawcett's obvious interest in Mrs. Lisle had developed, the memory of his last letter suggested a possible reason for this change in his appearance. He hoped that Fawcett would talk about Mrs. Lisle, but he decided not to ask questions.

Fawcett's appointment in South America naturally gave them plenty to talk about in an easy manner.

"Lucky fellow!" said Baines, handing him a cup of tea. "You can do your work, and see the world at the same time."

Fawcett's consciousness of his great good luck in another way made the appointment itself seem ordinary, though, indeed, as things went, it was a professional prize.

"Yes, it will be an interesting experience," he said, sipping his tea reflectively. "I've always had an idea that I should like to see something of life in one of the countries that are run more or less on comic-opera lines. This being a government enterprise, too, I shall have the chance of looking at things from the inside—perhaps taking a hand in high politics. I wonder how a contract like mine would stand in case of a revolution? My notion of South American places is, I fancy, based on the pictures I saw in some books of Jules Verne's when I was a boy. The general impression is that of crude contrasts—the very latest novelties of civilization planked down in the midst of barbarism."

"It's curious," said Baines, "how one always thinks of the Argentine as a sort of Alsatia; a place where people go when they've done something—shady financiers, runaway couples, and so on."

The remark was made innocently in pursuit of a

natural, indeed, an obvious train of thought, but Fawcett wondered whether Baines suspected anything. He did not lose his self-control, however, but said carelessly:

"By the way, what was the origin of the word Alsatia—used in that sense?"

"Oh, it was given to old Whitefriars," said Baines, "the district round the temple which used to have privileges of sanctuary. Oddly enough," he added with a laugh, "the place where you live is only a stone's throw from Alsatia."

"Judging from the look of some of the men in my building," said Fawcett, passing his cup to be refilled, "the sanctuary idea is still kept up. It's odd that doubtful speculators and lawyers should hang out together, but I suppose if you want to dodge the law it is necessary to live close to it."

"You'll give up your chambers, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. I can store the few things I have in the same building for a mere song."

The thought of the different way of living that would become necessary when he returned to England kept him silent for a few moments, and conscious that there was some little risk of embarrassment in talking too much about his own affairs, he said abruptly:

"Have you had any interesting cases lately?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, I think," said Baines reflectively. "Oh, by the way, you've heard about poor Lisle, I suppose?"

"No. What has happened to him?" said Fawcett, disturbed, though he did not know why.

"He is suffering from locomotor ataxia. He has become a patient of mine."

Fawcett rose, saying, "May I take a cigarette?"

"Oh, please!" said Baines, rising too. "Then Mrs. Lisle doesn't know?" he said, handing him a box of cigarettes.

"No, I don't think she does. In fact, I'm sure she doesn't," said Fawcett. His tone of conviction excited Baines' interest. The two men looked at each other across a lighted match. Fawcett sat down again.

"Tell me all about it, Baines," he said quietly; "that is, if you are at liberty to do so."

"Oh, of course," said Baines; "it's common knowledge in London. I'm surprised it didn't get into the papers. However, I'll begin at the beginning, because the whole thing is so interesting psychologically. It was last October, I think—yes, October—when I first met Lisle. Webster—a man you don't know—took me to his house one evening.

But I told you all that in my letter, I remember. By the merest luck, speaking professionally, I happened to see Lisle before anybody had remarked the disease, though I should have said that the symptoms were even then sufficiently obvious to any doctor. Indeed, I have reason to believe that one man who was not a doctor—Father Fabian Lester, the priest I told you about—had guessed what was wrong. But Lisle himself, though he knew that something was the matter, had no idea what it was."

"You didn't say anything about this when you wrote, Baines," said Fawcett gloomily.

"Oh, my dear fellow," said the doctor, with a deprecating movement of his hands, "I wasn't in a position—"

"No, of course not," Fawcett admitted. "Well, go on."

"About a week later," said Baines, "Lisle returned my visit. By this time he was evidently seriously alarmed about his state of health, and I'm inclined to believe that he had half made up his mind to consult me. He talked round the subject, you know, in the way they do. He was horribly frightened, poor chap, and I've no doubt that he harassed his imagination with pictures more unpleasant even than the reality. However, he said

nothing, and, of course, I couldn't. Then I heard nothing more of him for some time. I knew that he would have to call somebody in sooner or later, and I didn't care to go to see him in an ordinary way because it was a little difficult to ignore a thing so glaring. I heard casually that Miss Dacre had gone to America, but that didn't surprise me—for several reasons. Some time in January Webster told me that Lisle had joined the Roman church. That didn't surprise me either. Quite apart from the conclusions I drew from seeing Lester at his house, and their evident intimacy, it fitted in beautifully with my diagnosis. I don't mean to say that Lisle was insincere, or that he was frightened into religion; his going over was a natural result of the progress of his disease. With his temperament it was as much a symptom as, for example, when a general paralytic takes to giving away gold watches in the street. Webster also told me that Lisle had changed all his habits. He shut himself up and, with the exception of Lester, saw scarcely anybody, although, as you'll no doubt remember, his new poems had an immense popularity. His friends attributed his desire for solitude to his religious conversion, and they didn't bother him. He must have been getting rapidly worse, for the final break-

down came in April. It was Lester who persuaded him to call me in. I shall never forget the extraordinary relief it gave him to be able to talk openly about himself. He must have gone through a fearful time."

"How is he now?" said Fawcett.

"Pretty comfortable. Of course, he lives between the couch and the bath-chair. He behaved very sensibly when once he had taken me into his confidence. I persuaded him to take a smaller house a little way out, in Hampstead, and I got him a nurse. Lester seems devoted to him."

"Is there any hope?"

"Not the least," said Baines. "He'll just go on."

"For how long?"

"It's quite impossible to say. It might be for twenty years. So far as I can tell at present, it's an uncomplicated case of *tabes*. He'll get more and more helpless, of course."

They were silent for a little while, and then Fawcett said slowly:

"If I had known that you were going to tell me this I would have cut off my right arm rather than have come here this afternoon."

"I'm sorry," said Baines sympathetically.

Fawcett got up, walked across the room, and

stood with his hands in his pockets looking out of the open window into the empty street where an east wind stirred up little clouds of gray dust. He wheeled round abruptly.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't tell you, Baines. Mrs. Lisle is coming with me to the Argentine on Saturday."

Baines did not speak, but he flushed crimson. He felt that his professional enthusiasm in describing a good "case" had been, under the circumstances, almost an indecency.

"Why don't you say something?" said Fawcett irritably.

"My dear man," said Baines, in a tone and with a look of pain, "there's nothing to be said."

"But don't you see how all this—" began Fawcett, advancing into the room.

"Of course," said Baines. "It's a pity Mrs. Lisle didn't know."

"She mustn't know now, Baines," said Fawcett sharply.

"You think it would make a difference?" said Baines, as if he had no opinion of his own.

"I'm not going to think about it," said Fawcett with a vehement gesture. "I'm not going to take any risks. She shan't know. I understand now,"

he added with a bitter laugh, "why he asked her to go back to him."

"He wrote to her?" and Baines looked extremely interested.

"Some time ago."

"When, exactly? Forgive me, but I have a reason."

"Let me see," said Fawcett; "it was at the end of March."

"Then it was before the breakdown, before he called me in, before he knew that his case was hopeless. You must allow him that, Fawcett," said Baines quietly.

"Oh, I'll allow him anything," said Fawcett savagely, "anything but her. He simply doesn't count."

"And when he wrote she didn't know," continued Baines, as if he had not heard him.

"What do you mean, Baines?" said Fawcett, looking at him fixedly. "She wouldn't go back to him on any account. It was not any feeling for him that made her hesitate to come with me. Some scruple—you know what women are, Baines."

"It is exactly because, according to my lights, I know what women are that I see the terrible importance of this."

"Oh, it's not to be thought of," said Fawcett with

a despairing movement. "Why should it affect her? She's done with him."

"She is bound to know sooner or later."

"Later doesn't matter," said Fawcett, "but I won't have her disturbed now. Of course," he ungenerously added, "your sympathies are with your patient."

"Indeed, Fawcett, you are altogether mistaken," said Baines warmly. "I am trying to look at the case in the abstract. Don't you think," he continued, "that when, later, she hears about it, as she is certain to do, and particularly when she learns that you knew at the time, she will feel—"

"I wish to God you hadn't told me!"

"So do I, most heartily."

"What do you think she would do if she were told?"

"Oh, you mustn't ask me to predict," said Baines.

"It would be sheer cruelty to tell her now," said Fawcett irresolutely. "Leaving myself out of the question, she is on the point of beginning her life over again. For the last two years and more she has been killing time."

"If I know anything of women, she would rather be told now than later on."

"What consideration does he deserve? He was wantonly unfaithful to her. I'm ready to swear that she never knew how shamefully he deceived her. Why, damn it all, man," said Fawcett passionately, "you, as a doctor, must know that his condition now is probably due to his own vices!"

"That isn't my business," said Baines, "nor—pardon me—yours either. The man is in a pitiable condition, from which he can never recover; that is all that concerns us. But I'm not thinking about him; he isn't really the problem. Mrs. Lisle is the person to be considered. If she is the sort of woman I take her to be, her whole future happiness—and consequently yours—will depend upon her having had absolute freedom of choice, and to have that she must know everything. That is," he added with some embarrassment, "supposing she is still free to choose."

"I've kissed her once, Baines," said Fawcett, understanding what was in his mind. Baines put out his hand with an impulsive movement.

"My dear Fawcett," he said earnestly, "think of the plane the whole thing is upon! Are you going to drag it down? Putting on one side the personal consideration that she will never forgive you for

keeping her in ignorance, are you going to get her to sign a document without reading it?"

"It is sometimes necessary to protect people against themselves. Why should the strong be sacrificed to the weak? No woman ought to be put to such a test."

"That's a poor compliment to her. Don't go back on your creed, man. What you say about the strong and the weak is all right as far as it goes. But there is a new element—that of pity. How or when or why it came in we can't say, but it's there; you can't get away from it. You must give her the right to use or to withhold her pity. It's the highest privilege you can give her, and she will resent being robbed of that more than of anything else in the whole world."

"You mean to say that she would go back?" said Fawcett, putting words to his own fear.

"I say nothing. As I said, I can't predict. I only say that you must give her the choice."

"It would be such a wanton sacrifice. What could she do?"

Baines shook his head, saying:

"That doesn't affect the question."

"Would you blame her if she refused?"

"Good heavens, no!" said the doctor. "Who am

I that I should blame? Nobody could blame her. It simply comes to this, Fawcett—you must not be afraid to put her love for you to the test."

"How do you know that he wants her?"

"You say that he asked her."

"Yes, but that was before."

"And she refused. But don't you see, Fawcett, the man has dignity. He isn't a cur. When he wrote he must have known that he was seriously ill, but he didn't say so. Think how he might have appealed to her pity then."

"True," said Fawcett grudgingly. "I'm glad of that. For her sake I'm glad he isn't a cur."

"Well, are you going to be less generous than he?"

"Ah, the case is different. She doesn't love him."

"It's hardly a question of love now."

Fawcett looked at him quickly and said in a low voice:

"Tell me, Baines—as a husband he's dead?"

Baines gravely assented. Fawcett turned away, and for a few moments did not speak.

"As I understand it," he said at length, "you want me to give her the choice between love and pity?"

"Isn't it rather," said Baines, looking at him with earnest eyes, "that I want you to choose between two ways of loving her?"

There was again a little silence, and then:

"I suppose you are right, Baines," said Fawcett, seating himself heavily.

"I simply don't see how it is to be avoided."

"But who is to tell her? I can't."

Baines hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Look here, Fawcett—remembering all the circumstances—can you trust me?"

"Better than anybody I know."

"Thank you. Now I'll put the case against me in its extreme form. Lisle is my patient, and leaving out all sentimental considerations, it would be distinctly to his advantage as my patient that his wife came back to live with him. It's not necessary to go into all the details; the thing is obvious. For the future he won't be nearly so well off as he has been in the past. Nurses are expensive, and it would be difficult to find a nurse who would be an adequate companion to a man of Lisle's intelligence. Of course, he has his friend the priest, but he doesn't live with him. As a medical man, you see, I'm bound to take all this into account. But if you'll leave the affair to me, beyond the mere

statement which I must make I shan't use it to influence Mrs. Lisle. As a fellow creature, putting our friendship on one side, I don't think it's necessary for me to say what I hope will be the result."

"You'll tell her as if from me?"

"No, I think not," said Baines; "nor yet from him. It needs some thinking over, of course, but I believe it can be made to appear that I tell her on my own responsibility."

He said it lightly, but Fawcett recognized the weight of the responsibility and the courage that accepted it.

"Thank you, Baines," he said huskily, and they grasped hands.

"It must be done at once," added the engineer.

Baines went over to the big table by the window and looked at his engagement book.

"If I went down to-morrow," he said, "without sending word, and got to Compton early in the afternoon, should I be likely to find Mrs. Lisle at home?"

"Probably. If not she could be found."

"Good," said the doctor. "I can catch the eleven thirty-five from Paddington, which gets to Bristol at two thirty-two. I ought to be able to reach Compton at—what?—about half past three?"

"Yes, or a little later."

"Let me see—what's the name of her people?"

"Dixon."

"By the way," said Baines, "will it be necessary to explain who I am? Does Mrs. Lisle know my name, I mean?"

"Yes," said Fawcett; "she knows we are friends, and she knows that you know—him." He hesitated for a moment, and then added, "She has wanted to meet you."

Both men felt the heart-breaking sadness of the circumstances in which the meeting would take place, and they avoided each other's eyes. Each knew also that they were risking not only Fawcett's happiness but their own almost lifelong friendship. If Margaret decided to go back to her husband, they would never speak of it, but they would never forget the part that Baines had played in her decision. Their friendship could never be the same again. Fawcett picked up his hat, and Baines did not press him to stay.

"You'll let me know at once?" said Fawcett.

"She must do that."

Fawcett agreed; and Baines added:

"If I may venture—you mustn't expect her to decide without a moment's hesitation."

CHAPTER XIX

LIZZIE'S hare-brained but heroic attempt to play the part of a scapegoat apparently succeeded, at least so far as to prevent any unsavory gossip emerging from Under the Hill, where the right of men to thrash their women-folk was never questioned, into a region where it was likely to cause Margaret active annoyance. Among Margaret's acquaintances there was a general feeling of relief that Fawcett had gone before they had been compelled to decide whether their friendship with her could be stretched to cover conduct which was against all their standards of propriety. Even Mrs. Wakeling admitted that she had begun to be alarmed.

"I backed her up on principle, of course," she said to Mrs. Hobday, "but really at the end it looked as if he was taking her too seriously. That's the worst of men; they can't understand that flirtation is an art—they are always expecting it to mean something."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Mrs. Hobday rudely; "you've got art on the brain. When Margaret Lisle wants backing up she knows where to look for it."

Margaret found it rather difficult to adapt her expression and demeanor to the Dixons' air of sympathetic consideration when all the time she wanted to run about and sing for joy. Fortunately, the practical necessity for putting her affairs in order kept her from looking too indecently happy, while it provided her relations with convincing evidence that she was very sensibly "trying to forget all about him."

Her chief concern was that her flight should cause the least possible inconvenience to other people—particularly to her girl companions. Her plan was at the last moment to take Mrs. Hobday into her confidence and ask her to give a friendly supervision to Victoria and Phœbe as long as they cared to make use of the workshop. If the Dixons objected to that, she believed that Mrs. Hobday would be glad to lend them a room in her own house. On Monday afternoon she went into the workshop to write a long letter to Mrs. Hobday, which she intended to post in London on the eve of sailing. "I'm taking the change of scene you recommended," she began, "and I want to remind you of your

promise to look after my girls." She was still smiling over the sentence when the Dixons' housemaid brought in Baines' card. The blood left her cheeks; she dropped her pen and stood up glaring at the printed name, while the maid said a second time:

"Can he see you, ma'am?"

Baines' overwhelming curiosity to see the central figure in the drama into which he had been unwillingly projected for the moment took precedence of any other emotion, and enabled him to get into the workshop without the embarrassment which a sense of his mission might otherwise have caused him. As he advanced to her over the uneven boards he received the impression of an extremely attractive, bright-haired woman, in cool green linen, positively at her wits' end with fear—a fear which was expressed a moment later, as she mechanically gave him her hand, in the commonplace words:

"He's all right?"

"Perfectly all right," he said with admirable tact, ignoring the absence of a name in her question; and holding her hand a moment longer than convention allows at a first acquaintance, he smilingly added: "It was stupid of me not to send word. I forgot my professional character as the bringer of bad news."

She smiled with her white lips only as if to acknowledge his little joke, and said:

"He sent you?"

"May we take it," he replied with easy self-command, "that nobody sent me—that I came of my own account?"

She lost her look of fear, but her face clouded and her eager manner stiffened, and she said coldly:

"Certainly. Won't you sit down?"

He saw, with a pang of regret, that, whatever the result of his mission, she must always look upon him as a meddler, if not an actual enemy. He pulled forward one of the wicker chairs, and she sat down again by the writing-table, bolt upright, and gazed at him with half-defiant curiosity.

"You've seen Mr. Fawcett?" she said, and Baines, recognizing that he only existed for her as a means of communication, plunged into his subject.

"He came to see me yesterday," he said, "and in the course of conversation I gathered from him that you hadn't heard that Mr. Lisle is quite seriously ill. So, as his medical adviser, I took it upon myself to come down and tell you now. It was rather an unusual thing to do, but then the case is unusual."

"What's the matter with him?" she said sharply, and he marveled again at the indifference to every other man which love for one can induce in a woman not ordinarily unsympathetic.

He briefly explained the nature of Lisle's disease, and watched the struggle in her between indifference and half-incredulous dismay.

"You see," he said, "it's different from an ordinary illness. He is, so to speak, laid on the shelf, with, I fear, no prospect of ever leaving it."

"Did my husband tell you to come?" she said, evidently catching at a chance to keep compassion at bay.

"Oh, no. He doesn't know that I've come. As I said, I came entirely on my own account. I thought, you see, that it was something you would rather be told."

"Oh, certainly," she said quickly. "It would have been dreadful if—"

"It's extraordinary how sometimes things don't get known," he said, to cover her slip; "particularly nowadays, when all the details of a celebrated man's life are so eagerly snapped up by the newspapers."

"You say that you told Mr. Fawcett?" she asked.

"To his great surprise."

"What did he say?"

"He said that you had better be told at once," he said steadily.

She turned her head aside for a moment, resting her chin on her hand and her elbow on the flap of the table, and he thought, with sudden dismay, that she was about to give him her confidence; but she said, without looking at him:

"Shall you tell my husband that you have seen me?"

"Not necessarily. That is just as you wish."

"He wrote to me," she said; "he wrote to me some time ago, but he didn't tell me anything about this. It explains certain things in his letter that I did not understand. But I never dreamt—"

"May I ask when he wrote?" said Baines, interrupting a reflection which might carry her too far.

"On the twenty-sixth of March."

"Ah, you see," said Baines, as if the information were new to him, "he didn't consult me till the seventh of April."

"But he must have been ill then?" she said, eying him narrowly.

"Yes, he was ill, but he didn't know what was the matter with him. The breakdown came rather suddenly."

She took an easier position in her chair, as if she

had decided to allow greater familiarity between them, and said:

"I suppose you know our circumstances—that we have been separated for some time?"

"Yes, I know that," he said. "I made Mr. Lisle's acquaintance last year."

She made an inclination and said:

"And didn't you notice then that there was anything wrong?"

"Yes; but, of course, as he didn't consult me, I couldn't tell him."

"I wish you had," she said, half to herself. "At any rate, I wish I had known. You see," she continued, picking up an ivory paper-knife and playing with it, "when my husband wrote he asked me to go back and live with him again. I didn't think the arrangement would suit me at all, and I told him so. Apparently he accepted the reason I gave him, for he did not answer my letter. If I had known that he was ill, I don't suppose that I should have come to a different decision, but I should perhaps have put my refusal in different terms."

"Naturally," he said.

"You think that I ought to go back?" she said with a quick glance at him.

"No, not necessarily. As his doctor I can't help

seeing that that would be the most comfortable solution."

"Could I be of much use then—I mean practically?"

"You would be all the use in the world," he sadly admitted.

"But he has a nurse?"

"Yes, he has a very good nurse—a capable sympathetic woman of his own religion."

"Then shouldn't I be rather in the way than otherwise?" she said, trying to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

It was as if, he thought, she saw the walls of a prison closing in upon her and, too proud to seem afraid, sat very still, darting her eyes this way and that for some loophole of escape. Her desperately strained look made it hard for him to keep his head and do his duty, but he kept back his rising sympathy and said:

"No, I don't think you'd be in the way, Mrs. Lisle. Let me explain. You see, the characteristic of this illness is failing power—not necessarily of mental power, but of the nervous energy that makes it available. Your husband can't do so much literary work as he did, and as time goes on he will be able to do less and less."

The idea, as he saw, was new to her, and she said quickly:

"You mean that he will make less money?"

"Exactly."

"And if I went back he wouldn't need a nurse?"

She spoke quietly, but the paper-knife snapped in her fingers.

"No," he said, averting his eyes from her white face. "But I had better make it quite clear. There are two sides even to that question," he continued in a tone of forced cheerfulness. "So far as actual nursing is concerned, your going back wouldn't be an improvement. He couldn't be better nursed, even by you, than he is at present. Indeed, I doubt if with the best will in the world you could meet all the practical emergencies of the case as well as a trained nurse. You see, I stick up for the profession! But then there are other things to be considered. It is a case of infirmity rather than actual illness; the patient still keeps up his ordinary interests, his sensitiveness to surroundings, and the character of the people about him. Generally when a person is ill enough to require a nurse he is too ill to bother about anything beyond the relief of his bodily symptoms. But, as I said, that is not the case with your husband. Though, of course, again,"

he went on judiciously, "for that very reason the moral, the negative disadvantages of paid nursing might be turned to positive disadvantages if you went back and, as the saying is, didn't get on with your husband. If I may say it without impertinence, if you don't feel sure of your compatibility, or at least your own power to conceal your sense of incompatibility, your going back would most certainly be a mistake. You see," he concluded with a smile, "there's a great deal to be said on both sides, and you can hardly expect me to give an opinion either way. It is so peculiarly a question for yourself to decide. Nobody so well as yourself can judge which way would be best."

"Is there any chance that he may—that he may recover?"

"I'm afraid not," he said gravely; "but there is every reason to hope that he won't get perceptibly worse for some time. He may remain practically as he is for years. Of course, he will gradually get more and more helpless, but it may be very gradually."

"Does he suffer much pain?"

"Not at present. Indeed, he may not suffer much actual pain at any time. He suffers, you see, rather

from disabilities, from loss of movement, and the limitations that entails."

"I don't quite understand," she said, evidently trying to form a mental image. "What exactly is his condition?"

"You remember Heine? Well, he's like that."

She turned away her head, and he saw the muscle of her jaw stand out and her knuckles whiten with the strain of her clasped hands. Now that she had formed a definite picture in her mind, it would be kinder, he thought, to add the finishing touches, and he hurried on:

"He's like that. At present there are no complications, but one can't be sure that they will not arise."

"What do you mean?"

"He might go blind, for example."

"Blind!" she echoed in a dreadful tone.

"I'm telling you the worst," he said doggedly; "probably nothing of the sort will happen. As I said, at present he is quite comfortable. I persuaded him to move out to Hampstead, and he gets out on the heath every day."

She asked him for the full address and made a note of it, and he continued:

"He has evidently formed a great attachment to his priest; he is quite cheerful and resigned. There is, indeed, a curious compensation in such cases. A patient suffering from your husband's affliction frequently loses the desire for not only bodily activity but for the more restless, the grosser forms of mental exercise. There is often—how shall I put it—a spiritualization of the faculties, a patience, a contentment, a decline of personal ambition without any waning of intellectual power; an approach to what I suppose religious people would call the peace of God."

She remained silent, leaning her chin on her hand. He could not tell what was passing in her mind but, as if in his capacity as a doctor he had drawn too dark a picture of her husband's condition, he was conscious now of an almost frantic desire to lighten it, to insist upon redeeming features.

"It has come as a very great shock to me," she said presently in a colorless tone, and passing her hand over her face. "I thought he was quite well—and very happy. He seemed to have found what he really wanted. He was such a strong man. I don't remember that he was ever ill in his life. And we had both come to the conclusion that we got on much better apart. That was why his letter sur-

prised me. It annoyed me, too. What I said in reply must have seemed rather brutal."

"But why?" said Baines, moving restlessly in his chair. "He did not tell you that he was ill."

"No, not in so many words. But I see now that I ought to have gathered—"

"Oh, but he wouldn't do that!" he interrupted excitedly.

"Do what?"

"Appeal to your generosity. Men never do," he added incoherently—"not men like your husband."

"Generosity?" she said, weighing the word.

"May I speak quite plainly," he said, leaning forward eagerly with his hands on the arms of the wicker chair, "and perhaps trespass a little beyond my province?"

"Oh, do, please," she said gratefully.

"Well, if it's a matter of generosity I say most emphatically, don't."

"Don't—"

"Don't go back," he said, fixing his eyes on her.

Her breast heaved up with an uncontrollable sigh, and she said chokingly:

"Why?"

"Because, you see, he would be bound to know it." He jumped up and began to walk to and fro,

talking agitatedly. "It's a matter of the most terrific importance to you both, and if you take my advice you won't act on impulse. You'll take time to consider. If he were actually dying it would be a matter of much less consequence. It isn't a matter of weeks or of months, but of years. You've got to ask yourself whether you can stand it. I know that if you decided you would at all costs stick to your decision; but if you began to fret he would be sure to find it out, and that—I speak as a doctor—that would be the worst thing that could possibly happen. It would be intolerable both for him and for you if you undertook this from a sense of duty, and all the time you were thinking—you were thinking that you would rather be back here, you know. It would have the worst possible effect upon him. And then it might not be easy to leave him a second time—of course, I don't know your circumstances here," he interpolated hastily, "but the opportunity might be lost forever. If you can't accept willingly, I most certainly say don't accept at all."

"If I can't accept willingly I won't accept at all," she said, like one repeating a lesson.

"That's right, that's right," he said, resisting the impulse to pat her on the shoulder. "And there's another thing. He must never even know that

you've been approached. The fact that he didn't write again proves that he accepted your refusal as final. So, if you go, it must be made to seem spontaneous. You can say that you saw it in the papers. Don't think that I'm afraid to own to the responsibility of having told you. In an ordinary case I shouldn't care a hang. Goodness knows, we doctors often have to take more on our shoulders than that! But with a man so finely tuned, so highly strung, a man whose peace of mind depends so much on the idea of things, one has to be cautious, very cautious. He must be managed. So you will have to make it seem the one thing in the world you want to do; there must be no apparent sacrifice."

"You needn't be afraid," she said quietly, "whatever I do shall be done spontaneously. There'll be no sacrifice."

He was acutely dissatisfied. In proportion as she grew calmer, more resigned, as he thought, he got more excited. He wanted to say, "You mustn't take what I have told you about his condition too seriously." He wished that she were not so horribly calm. Why didn't she break down and cry, or something?

"It's so fatally easy in coming to a decision of

this sort to regard the object as entirely passive," he went on, "as an impersonal target for one's generosity or self-sacrifice. You know the stories that were told about society ladies who went out to nurse the soldiers in South Africa? How they would insist on shaking up the men's pillows whether they wanted it or not? With the ordinary sick man that doesn't matter; he *is* more or less a passive object. But in your husband's case it is altogether different. He isn't a sick man—not in that sense. He's got his wits about him. Oh, you don't know! He'll lie and think and worry; he'll watch you ever so closely for the least sign of impatience or boredom. But there, why need I run on?" He laughed nervously and said, with a happy inspiration, "It's my duty to my patient, you see, to take care that there isn't so much as a crumpled rose leaf."

She did not speak. He saw that she was deliberately not thinking about what she intended to do, and that probably she would not think for several hours. He walked up and down for a step or two, halted irresolutely, and finally pulled out his watch.

"Well," he said in a more professional tone than he had used hitherto, "now tell me if there's anything more you'd like to know. Anything that will

help you to get a clearer picture of exactly how things are with him."

"I don't think there's anything, thank you," she said. "I think I understand."

Still he hesitated, trying to think of some final summing-up that would leave the alternatives evenly balanced.

"The thing to remember," he said, "is that there is no moral compulsion whatever. It is entirely a question for yourself to decide without regard to anybody's opinion; and further, that in a strictly practical sense you will be doing positively wrong if you act in a hurry, if you go back without a clear recognition of all it means, of all it may cost you. Now I will bid you good afternoon. I really must catch the five fifty-two from Bristol."

"Won't you stop for a cup of tea?" she said hesitatingly.

He looked at her questioningly and began:

"Do you think—"

"Oh, there's plenty of time—it isn't half past four yet," she said, rising. She picked up the letter she had begun to Mrs. Hobday, glanced at it with a faint smile, put it away and closed the desk, saying, as she turned the key with a jerk:

"You will really be doing me a service."

"Thank you so much. I shall be delighted," he said hastily.

As they were crossing the field to the house she said abruptly:

"Are you likely to see Mr. Fawcett?"

"Would you like—"

"Oh, no, no," she said, "I was only going to say that perhaps it would be as well to say nothing to any of my friends until I have thought this over."

They passed the fly in which he had driven out from Bristol, waiting at the door, and entered the house. Mrs. Dixon concealed her curiosity admirably, but Margaret made no difficulty about the introduction.

"Polly, this is Doctor Baines," she said. "He very kindly came to tell me that Austin is ill."

"Is it very serious?" said Mrs. Dixon eagerly.

Baines glanced at Margaret, who invited him with her eyes to explain the nature of Lisle's illness. As she listened Mrs. Dixon visibly stiffened like an angry bird, and at the end, cross-examined him. It was quite evident that she believed Lisle was malingering. Baines, dreading the emotional effect of one woman upon the other, talked incessantly as he swallowed his tea. Margaret went with him to the door. He held her hand in his firm grip, trying,

without effect, to read what was in her face as he said:

"The only thing that will ever worry me will be the fear that you have regarded me as anything more than the skilled reporter, without the right or the knowledge to advise you one way or the other."

"You've done absolutely the right thing," she said. "I'm very grateful."

When Margaret got back to the drawing-room Mrs. Dixon said, evidently with a full consciousness of the wickedness of what she was saying and a pride in it:

"I hoped, Margaret, that he was going to say that Austin was dead or dying."

"That's rather savage, isn't it, Polly?" said Margaret, cutting herself a piece of cake.

"Well, I don't care!" said Mrs. Dixon with a sob and a stamp of her foot. "After the way he's treated you I have no patience with him. You don't seem to be able to get rid of him anyhow."

CHAPTER XX

AGAIN and again Fawcett was on the point of telegraphing to Margaret, "Have you seen Baines?" but the knowledge that she must be suffering a worse ordeal than his own restrained him. Monday passed without news of her. He spent the greater part of the night walking the streets, returning, worn out, to his rooms with daylight for a few hours' heavy slumber. Doggedly determined to hope for the best he tried to forget his anxiety in practical affairs. He had the superstitious fear of seeming to admit to himself by the slightest hesitation in his arrangements that they were conditional, and he went on making preparations for Margaret's comfort, on the voyage and afterward, as if her sailing with him must follow as a necessary consequence. But three times on Tuesday morning he interrupted his engagements to go back to his rooms to see if there was any message from her.

At two o'clock, when he returned from an attempt to make a meal at a restaurant in the

Strand, the soldierly porter, with his air of tired wisdom, looked out from behind his glass barrier at the foot of the stone staircase and silently gave him a telegram. For a second or two Fawcett was afraid to open it. As if to prepare himself against a shock which he must bear in solitude, he mechanically pushed open the swing-door leading to a dark lobby where railway time-tables and theater bills were displayed for the convenience of the occupants of the building. Here he sat down, tore open the envelope and read:

"Will be with you about five. Margaret."

He knew then that Margaret had seen Baines, but the message told him nothing more. He read it again and again, trying to find some significance in the handwriting of the telegraph clerk. Telegrams, he thought irritably, ought to be typewritten; there should be no intrusion of human character to excite and still baffle the imagination in these curt and poignant missives. He tried to reassure himself against the fatal conclusion to be drawn from the fact that Margaret was coming to London before the date arranged. If she had refused to allow Baines' communication to alter her decision, he said to himself, what the doctor told her might nev-

ertheless cause her to hasten the step, after which, for her, there could be no going back. Surely there was promise in the wording, "Will be with you."

He went up-stairs into a long, gloomy, echoing passage, like the corridor of a prison, with numbered doors on either side, and pushed the button of an electric bell set in the wall. The summons was answered by a maid servant, still, at this hour of the day, about her endless labors with brush and pail, who emerged ghostlike on silent feet from a room at the end of the passage. Fawcett told her that a lady was coming to see him at five o'clock. Female visitors were sufficiently rare in that gray place to be objects of curiosity, and the little, flat-chested, ageless creature, standing confidentially near, looked up at his preoccupied face with friendly interest. As if she had read in his looks that Margaret was coming a long journey, she proposed that she should bring tea to his room. For the moment he had an insane impulse to put the case before her. She was at least a woman, and her opinion of what a woman in Margaret's situation would do might be worth hearing.

"Tea for two," she said, nodding her head several times, with perfect comprehension, as if to say, "You just leave it to me."

Absurd as it may seem, her confidential manner a little encouraged him. He was in the mood to find omens in the flight of a sparrow.

It was impossible for him to spend the three hours' interval indoors, but he could not give his mind to business. He sought relief in movement, and walked out westward along the Strand and through Trafalgar Square into Piccadilly. London was full and gay. The afternoon was oppressively hot, with blinding sunlight and thunder in the air. The weather conditions, felt in the nerves rather than observed by the senses, affected people strangely; in spite of the heat they seemed more restless even than usual, and talked and laughed with irritable vivacity, as if something were about to happen. Passing along Piccadilly, Fawcett stopped to look idly in a bookseller's window. His eyes, traveling along a row of newer volumes, cunningly forced into notice on a little shelf, rested mechanically on a green cover that looked familiar. "New Poems, by Austin Lisle," he read.

The title affected him painfully, and he turned away with a muttered curse. He knew little about the life of books, but that a volume of poetry should be holding its own, three months after publication, among the last new novels, gave him a sinister im-

pression of persistence. Lisle was there; he held his place. How far did he hold his place in Margaret's imagination? In spite of what Baines had told him, and his own judgment, Fawcett could not shake off the idea that Lisle's illness was a stroke of policy. He played a waiting game; what he could not achieve by claims upon his wife's affection he hoped to achieve by appealing to her pity. The trite saying, "Pity is akin to love," came into Fawcett's mind. He was quite sure that Margaret did not love her husband; he had a dozen memories to convince him of that. Forgetting for the moment that Lisle probably did not recognize that his wife's affection for him was dead, and that he could know nothing about the problem now set before her, Fawcett was filled with angry contempt for the man who could accept such a sacrifice from any woman. Then he remembered that, whatever happened, Lisle would not know that his wife had been moved by pity. Well, he ought to be told. He ought to have the case put before him. It was due to his manhood that he should be given a chance of refusing to be a party to an unspeakable wrong. Putting himself on one side, thought Fawcett, it would be an indecency to allow Margaret to go back to this wreck of a man, the victim of his own excesses. He hesi-

tated; pulled out his watch and looked round for the nearest telephone call-office. He would get Lisle's address from Baines, go to him and say:

"Look here, your wife does not love you; she loves me. I can give her a new life while you can only give her a prison. Are you going to stand in her light, to take away her chance of happiness?"

But in another moment he came to his senses. Margaret would never forgive any tampering with her privilege to choose for herself.

He understood now that he had already wronged her by distrust. He remembered the scene in the workshop when he had come upon her reading her husband's poems. He had been afraid to tell her that Lisle and Laura Dacre had parted. Even if he had told her then, it would have been too late to prevent her writing to her husband, but it would have prepared her for his astonishing reply. There could be no doubt that Lisle's letter had strongly moved Margaret in Fawcett's direction; and if, when he first asked her to go to South America with him, she had known that her nominal grievance against her husband had ceased to exist, nobody could say what might have happened.

With these bitter thoughts in his mind he turned into Hyde Park and sat down on a seat with his

back to the Row. The rhododendrons were in full bloom; great globes of clear delicate color wavering in the hot air. Their generous beauty and the sultry afternoon reminded him of the tropics, and he began to think, as he had hardly had time to think before, of the future he had planned with Margaret. He pictured a rude hut standing beside the crude beginnings of railway work in a dusty plain. It would be a dry barren country, he thought, but with sudden splashes of hot vivid color —the place for a passion. Staring at the bushes he had a vision of Margaret coming toward him in the cool of the evening, her eyes full of love, her hands full of strange flowers. He was not remarkably sensual, and hitherto the very idea of his good fortune had kept the physical side of his love for Margaret in abeyance; but now that he might be within an hour of losing her, his imagination tortured him. She was so admirably a woman to be loved; her very honesty would give depth and strength to her passions when once she abandoned herself to them. By a natural transition his thoughts turned to baseness, and he said to himself with a savage laugh:

"Well, anyhow, he's dead as a husband."

For shame he wrenched his thoughts away and

tried to take notice of his surroundings, but he saw them all in relation to the same idea. The chairs lining the Row were crowded with smartly dressed women of all ages, most of them talking in loud harsh voices. Half unconsciously he compared them with Margaret. He could not imagine any one of them really sharing a man's life. The young were silly, the mature hard and worldly. There were women one might care to flirt with, even to make love to; but in the intervals one would want to pack them away in a box along with the other toys. Margaret was a woman for always, a woman in whom one could find a response to every mood.

To distract his thoughts from her he got up and walked on toward the gardens. By the time he had reached the Alexandra Drive the storm that had been threatening all day had gathered overhead. Tall hard-edged clouds were rising above the noble elms, and presently there was a peal of thunder, followed by a heavy downpour of rain. He hurried across the grass, and took shelter under the veranda of the tea pavilion. Near to him a slim graceful girl in a white dress had got into difficulties with a bobtail puppy—a ridiculous, wabbling mass of gray fur. The animal, frightened by the thunder, had wound its lead round and round her legs, holding

her a laughing prisoner. Fawcett released her, and as she thanked him there was a hint of coquetry in her glance and smile, an almost involuntary expression of youth and the joy of life, as innocent of evil as the clumsy gambols of the little bear-like animal at her feet. At any other time Fawcett would have acknowledged the challenge with a light word or two while the rain lasted, but in his present mood it angered him that anybody should trifle, however innocently, with the terrible passion. He lifted his hat and turned away so abruptly that the pretty creature was left red with shame and vexation.

A clock warned him that it was time to return to his rooms, and he left the gardens through the rain and hailed a hansom. He recognized, with a fresh pang, that he was afraid to meet Margaret. How different was her coming to him from that he had imagined! He reached his rooms in time to make a hasty toilet. His windows, being at the back of the building, looked out on a wide expanse of glass roofing, like a frozen lake, bounded by lofty brick walls. On every side were printing works, and at five o'clock there set in the deep vibrating roar of the machines—a heralding sound.

The moment Margaret entered the room he knew

that he had lost her. She hardly waited for the maid to close the door, and then came up to him with a dreadful smile of abject humility. The bitterness of the blow hardened him, and for a second or two he remained unresponsive, but she put her arms about him with a low cry asking for forgiveness. He yielded to her touch, and they stood with closed eyes locked in an embrace that had all the passion of despair. She drew her white face away from his to say anxiously:

"There was nothing else I could do, was there?"

"Oh, don't ask me," he said brokenly. "You know best."

"Don't make it harder for me than it is already," she murmured, releasing herself and turning away.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. Margaret sat down, and in answer to Fawcett's "Come in" the maid entered with the tea-tray. Fawcett understood that with the admirable discretion of her kind she had judged it better to get the interruption over and done with. Leaning with his elbow on the mantelpiece, he mechanically watched her as, with an expressionless face, she set the things on the table.

"If you want anything more, you'll ring," she said, as if to tell him that she would see that he was

not disturbed again. She had not once looked at Margaret, but when she had left the room Margaret said in a whisper:

"Look what the dear thing brought!" and Fawcett then took in what he had already seen without noticing, three red roses in a tumbler, the little gray creature's offering to the pageant of life.

Not knowing what to say, he awkwardly asked Margaret:

"You'll have some tea?"

"Oh, of course," she said briskly. "I'll pour it out." She got up, and pulling off her gloves, added uncertainly, and without looking at him: "You don't ask me to take off my hat."

With a sudden wild hope he moved toward her, but she took his face between her two hands and said gravely:

"We've accepted. Now let us for an hour forget."

He understood then that she was asking for his support in her renunciation; that, having renounced, she wanted him to help her to prove to herself how well she could bear it. For this purpose she had delayed her coming till now, until the first agony of the struggle in her own mind was over.

"Let me, then," he muttered, and with unsteady fingers drew out the pins from her hat.

"When?" he said over his shoulder, as he bent to lay the hat on a chair. She understood him, and said:

"I wired to him that I would come this evening."

"Oh, why did you do that?"

"It was necessary. Unless I had made it quite sure, I couldn't have dared to come to you now."

So they sat at his table as they might have sat in their own house in the years to come. In her pathetic determination to make him agree that they were not balked by outside interference, but that they gave up, she spared him nothing of the idea of intimacy. He drank and ate the tea and the food that nearly choked him, and under her pleading eyes kept up the matter-of-fact conversation. She talked about Baines with whimsical humor.

"I suppose he knew?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"I thought so. But he was very clever. He didn't give you away. Do you know, I hardly noticed what he was like. You see, I had to keep him from seeing that I knew that he knew, and I'm afraid the poor man must have thought me rather a terror. However, I'll try—"

And then realizing how she must be hurting him by calling his imagination to the opportunities she would have in the future of renewing her acquaintance with the doctor, she left the sentence unfinished and picked up the roses to hide her eyes.

After tea she made him smoke, and moved about the dingy comfortless room examining his books and instruments and asking questions. One might have thought that she was unfeeling, but presently, as if oppressed by his silence, she turned round abruptly and said:

"You're not sorry that I came, are you?"

He made some inarticulate answer, and she came and stood before him, saying earnestly:

"We had it all in our reach and gave it up; do you understand? Willingly, yes, willingly," she insisted. "I because it is my lot, and you for my sake. Just because you love me you give me up."

"I think it is madness," he said, turning away.

"Do you think it is easy for me, my dear?" she said sadly. "Don't think that I'm under the delusion that I'm doing anything heroic or great or noble. It's a desertion, a going back. I'm simply not big enough to keep going ahead regardless of the others; that's all it is. There are women who might have known what I know and still gone on.

I shouldn't have blamed them—not I! I should have said 'Bravo!' But I can't do it myself. You've got to love me as I am. Being what I am this is the only thing I can do and still keep in the least worthy of your love. I most devoutly wish I hadn't known. If I had heard—afterward—my place would have been with you. Oh, no," she said, seeing the anguished look on his face, and putting her hand on his arm, "don't think that I am blaming you for telling me. You had to tell me. But I wish we hadn't known—I wish we hadn't known."

He thought of her future, and all his being recoiled from the picture presented to his imagination.

"You can't do it—you can't do it!" he said huskily.

"But I can, and will. Indeed, it is you who must make me. It is you who would have made me the best I could be under other circumstances, and it is you who must help me to be the best I can be now. That is the only fulfilment of our love that we can have that would not be an indignity to the name of love. It's for love's sake that we give up."

"Even if you cared for him—" he began.

"Don't you see that he really doesn't count?" she

said rather impatiently. "It's ourselves that matter."

"He must count," he persisted. "If you don't care for him you must hate him."

"No, I shan't hate him—and you mustn't either."

"But have you really thought of what you are doing? Have you tried to picture—?"

"I've thought of it all. What do you suppose I've been doing since I heard? But forget—forget," she said, kissing him. "This moment is ours; let us make the most of it. I am here in your house—in our house. Let us have peace in our house while it is ours. Which is your favorite chair? This? Then I shall sit in it."

She sat down in an old stuffed armchair covered with brown leather, and made him sit at her feet with his head against her knees.

"Tell me what you have been doing since you came up," she said, with her hands in his hair. He tried to tell her, but everything that he had done had been so inextricably entangled in thoughts of her that he could not finish the sentences.

"Yes, yes," she said, giving his head a little shake, "you ordered me a steamer trunk; you must have sent it to me. Whatever you bought for me you must give me; I have a right to it." Her hand

tightened on his head as if to prevent his moving it, and she went on: "I shall keep the things, you know, as women keep the things they got ready for the children that were never born."

She talked on in a foolish disjointed way with a freedom, an intimacy that tore the heart out of him at the time, but which afterward, perhaps, may have been some comfort to him to remember. Perhaps her woman's wisdom, nearer to the bases of life, guided her to say the words that would lastingly console if any words could. Short of the surrender which would have made her leaving him impossible, she wanted to give him the last essence of her being. At the time it only increased his sense of what he was losing—the tenderness, the companionship, the courage. The bitter-sweet hour passed, and a dreadful silence came in which neither dared say the words, "It's time to go." At last, to spare her, he got up and gave her his hands. But when they stood upright face to face her courage failed her, and she moved blindly forward into his arms.

"I can't, I can't!" she wailed. "Oh, why did we wait? Why didn't you take me away when you first heard you were going to America?"

With her gasping in his arms he knew that the

worst ordeal was after all to be his. She had put herself into his hands and he must send her away. He saw clearly now that she had been right in saying that she must go back to her husband. She would be miserable if she did not; she was not made of the right stuff to be ruthless in claiming her own happiness.

"Yes, I know," he murmured, soothing her. "I ought not to have listened. I ought to have insisted."

"No, it wasn't your fault. I was such a fool!"

It may be forgiven him that for the moment he lost his head. All his nature rose up in rebellion against the cruelty of their lot. Why should they be so forbearing? The fierce longing to tear at least a moment's joy out of despair overmastered him. He strained her to him, and hardly knowing what he said, whispered:

"To-night. Stay with me to-night. Not here; we'll go to some hotel. Send a wire."

She lifted a face that shocked him with its terrible acquiescence.

"If you'll kill me in the morning," she gasped. "I never thought of that way out. Why didn't I? One so often sees it in the newspapers. Lovers found dead at a hotel. It has always seemed so—

so squalid, somehow. Oh, but I understand now. The poor people!"

He was immediately brought to his senses and stopped her, saying:

"You know I couldn't kill you, dear. I'm glad you said that. It shows me the selfish brute that I am. I didn't know what I was saying. Forget what I said."

Only now he fully understood his responsibility and the shameful guilt that would be his if he abused it. Now, at last, in her words, he accepted. When she was a little calmer, at the risk of seeming brutally anxious to get rid of her, he said:

"I'll come part of the way."

She clung to him, saying piteously:

"Oh, you must come all the way with me," and seeing his half-incredulous look, she added, "to the door."

"Will that be wise?"

"But, indeed, I shan't go unless you take me there. You give me up."

"Very well," he said, kissing her on the forehead, "I give you up."

He made her sit down again to recover herself. Of the two he now seemed to care the least. He talked calmly, almost cheerfully, about the journey

before them. "You'll be glad to make yourself tidy," he said, and without stopping for her answer, went into the bedroom and hastily tidied it, pouring water into the basin. He came back and she went into the room. Presently she called to him, "Please bring me my hat." For a moment he instinctively hesitated with it at the door, but, understanding her wish that they should not seem afraid of themselves or each other, went right in. She stood before the looking-glass giving a touch to her hair. His own face appeared in the glass over her shoulder, and she said, "I'm nearly as tall as you." She turned round, her hands busy with the pins of the hat, and kissed him lightly. The momentary caress, with its implication of use and wont, was more dear to him than any she had given or allowed. He remembered the day he had gone into the workshop and found Lizzie brushing her hair.

"What about Lizzie?" he said.

"Oh, of course, she'll come to me."

"I'm glad of that," he said, and again, "I'm glad of that." It seemed to him that his interests were somehow represented by the girl who had so nearly brought them together.

When they went back in the sitting-room, Mar-

garet looked round with a faint smile, as if taking leave. Her eyes finally rested on the table, and she made a pounce, saying:

"Ah! We must have our roses!"

She pinned one of the flowers in his coat and took another. The third she kissed and put back in the tumbler.

"When you come back," she said.

Passing along the bare hollow-sounding corridor they met the little housemaid. Margaret nodded and smiled to her, and when she was out of ear-shot said:

"Is she the one who looks after you?"

"Yes," he replied.

"What's her name?"

"Mary."

"Mary—what?"

"I'm sure I don't know," he said vaguely, "they are always just Marys in places like this."

"Never mind," she said, "I shall send you something for her."

When they reached the foot of the stairs a cart had just started from before the door. The tired porter came forward and said:

"There's a trunk just come for you, sir."

"Take it up-stairs to my room, will you?" said

Fawcett in a muffled tone; "but first call me a hansom, please."

The man went into the street and whistled. Margaret crossed the hall to the trunk, and saw the initials "M. F." stenciled in black upon the brown surface.

"I shan't have them altered," she said, turning round; "that's what I am."

The hansom came rattling up, and Fawcett put her into it.

"What's the address?" he said, trying to keep the repugnance out of his voice.

"Number 7, Campion Road, Hampstead."

He told the man where to drive and got into the cab. They drove up the Lane into the crash and bustle of Holborn. The street, freshened by the rain, which had now ceased, was thronged with people hurrying westward after the day's work. It was now nearly seven o'clock, and as they turned to the right they began to meet pleasure-seekers coming down from the northern suburbs into town for the evening; happy couples, in hansoms, dressed for dining and the theater; obviously country cousins, frankly keen and excited.

"Well, we've had one meal together, anyway," said Margaret.

They spoke but little during the drive; there was so little to be said. They were afraid to speak of the future, and they were too near to the past to find any comfort in recalling it. Presently Margaret asked him:

"You'll write?"

"I think not," he said.

She reflected for a moment, and then agreed.

"No, that's better. You'll go on. I shall hear of you, not from you."

Her one anxiety seemed to be that he should form the most cheerful idea of her future environment. As they passed through the dreadful squalor of Kentish Town, the gray streets only brightened by the public houses at the corners, she felt his depression, and tried to reassure him.

"It isn't a bit like this, you know," she said. "You've never been to Hampstead? Oh, I assure you it's very different. You go up and up. See—there are gardens already. And the heath is really glorious."

She was, as he could feel, a little disappointed that Campion Road did not actually look out on the heath. She held his hand and talked rapidly as the hansom lurched round the corner.

"There are trees—limes, aren't they? Oh, yes;

and do you see the houses stand high; there are quite a lot of steps to them. Yes, and there are the dearest little gardens at the back. The lilacs and laburnums are over, of course. I wonder if there are lilacs at Number 7? Ah, this is Number 7."

He got out and silently gave her his hand. He wondered if she had reflected that they would probably be seen from the window, and the thought occurred to him that even then she might have had the forlorn hope that something would happen in consequence of her being brought to the house by a man. He was never to know what passed in her mind during those last moments.

He waited on the pavement while she went up the steps. After she had rung the bell she turned and looked down at him, smiling, though her face was deadly white. The door was opened. He heard her give the name "Mrs. Lisle" in a clear tone, and the door closed upon her.

CHAPTER XXI

MARGARET saw with relief that Lisle was not alone. On her entrance a woman in the gray and white uniform of a nurse got up and stilled the barking of a little Skye terrier, and the burly figure of a priest stood in the bay of the window. The woman, after a keen glance at her patient, as if to make sure that he might be trusted to support the occasion, left the room and gently closed the door, but the priest remained. Lisle lay on a couch with a red rug folded across his legs as if for concealment as well as warmth. He put out his long white hands, holding them perfectly straight, with the fingers parallel, in an attitude which had the poignancy of an intended symbolism. The little dog lay down again on the red rug and wagged its tail.

Just for a moment Margaret hesitated; she had a mingling of emotions, and it seemed imperative that she should act upon the right one, that she should begin as she could go on. It was only for a

moment, and then everything cleared. She crossed the room, and her lips that had so lately burned with her lover's rested on her husband's forehead. The action was purely instinctive, but it seemed aptly to imply forgiveness of the past and acceptance of the future. She kissed not a man but a mind that was henceforward hers for ministration.

Lisle had grown a small beard, and that character of the slightly vulgar picturesque which he had owed to his melting brown eyes and mustache worn a trifle too long was refined away. His eyes burned with a drier light, and the crisp dark beard, while defeating the emphasis of the mustache, did not hide the delicate lines of the jaw and chin. He was of an even pallor, but not unhealthily white; the fine bony framework of his face, the arch of the hollow orbits, accentuated by the foreshortening of his head on the pillow, had emerged like a nobler first intention from the degrading influence of time and weakness. He looked like the Christ of an early German master.

He lay holding Margaret's hand, but not caressing it, between his own. The priest, without moving from his place at the window, said some words in Latin that Margaret could not understand, and Lisle responded. The ritual of the moment over,

the husband smiled up at the wife. Tears gathered in his eyes, and rolled into the hollows beneath them, but he still smiled. He began to speak in a quiet voice that was altered from the voice Margaret remembered, slightly higher in pitch, more deliberate in articulation.

"It's quite beautiful the way you came, Margaret," he said. "I was so afraid you would come in the rain. Now we can date everything after the storm—'Not through any tongue of flesh, nor angel's voice, nor sound of thunder'—you remember? I could almost wish, you know, that you hadn't telegraphed. That you had simply come."

"As a practical man," said the priest, with a jolly laugh that rang strangely in the room, "I'm sincerely glad that Mrs. Lisle did send a telegram."

"Isn't he a hopeless Philistine!" said Lisle delightedly. "Let me introduce Father Fabian."

Margaret bowed, and her eyes met the priest's in a momentary interchange of glances. He looked at her with a faint smile on his massive aquiline face, which did not conceal extraordinary interest and a puzzled dissatisfaction. She received from him the impression of power and quite good-humored but merciless fanaticism. She felt that she did not like him, but he gave her confidence,

and she was grateful to him for staying. She fancied that Lisle was grateful, too.

"Well, I kick against pathetic fallacies of all kinds," said the priest, with more intention in the words, thought Margaret, than his easy indolent manner indicated, "and I'd like to know what Baines and Nurse Kelly would have said if Mrs. Lisle had dropped in unexpectedly."

"You don't know Baines, do you?" said Lisle, looking up at her.

"Yes, I've met him," said Margaret.

Lisle nodded, but did not ask any questions; and Margaret recognized, as an incidental fact, without considering its advantages or disadvantages to herself, that it was tacitly allowed that no questions were to be asked. They were to begin again "after the storm." Lisle did inquire after the health of the Dixons, but in a kindly perfunctory way that required only formal answers. Apparently he wished to make it appear as if she had only been absent on a visit.

"Why did Nurse Kelly go away?" he said presently, with the faintest disappointment.

"Ah, I expect, you know, she feels her nose is put out of joint," said Father Fabian. "She's probably crying in the kitchen."

"Let me ring for her," said Margaret, rising from her chair by the couch, strangely glad to move and do something. She recognized with some amusement that Lisle had not outgrown his need for an audience. He wanted them all round him, even on so touching an occasion as this. The thought gave her a comfort of which she tried to feel ashamed.

Nurse Kelly answered the bell. She was a young middle-aged woman with a grave mouth, light blue eyes, and eyebrows with a humorous twist at their outer extremities. In shaking hands, she gave Margaret a subtly feminine glance which indulgently mocked at the two men.

"This is Nurse Kelly's first experience in a literary household," said the priest, "and her familiar gods are in sad confusion. We discovered the other day that she has a vice; she is a secret reader of—"

"Oh, go on with yer, Father," said the nurse, placidly smoothing down her apron. "I like the tears and laughter laid on with a trowel and plenty of lords and ladies, and I'm not ashamed to say so. I get enough of rale life in me wurruk."

Margaret understood that they already had their little private collection of jokes at one another's expense. Probably, she thought, they had nicknames

derived from the Fathers. Even the dog had his definite status in the household. He, too, had to be introduced to her, with an account of his history and theological views, and she to him with the words:

"This is the missis, Bruno. We've talked about her, haven't we? How does it go?" and pulling at the dog's ears with nervous fingers, Lisle quoted the verses of Heine:

> " 'Every day I ask on rising,
> Comes my dear to-day?
> And at night fall back complaining
> Still she stays away!
>
> " 'In the night I lie with sorrow,
> Sleepless and awake,
> Dreaming how by day my journey
> Half in sleep I take.'

"Only we don't rise; but we are allowed compensations that he hadn't, eh, old fellow? And we begin to think that the 'mattress-grave' can be made very tolerable."

Nothing could have made more clear to Margaret the tragical reality of the man's suffering, and the not less tragical sincerity of his joy at her return, than this wanton sentimentality in him who had

ever a witty stab for the person who spoke with feeling in his presence.

Yet, in spite of Lisle's emotional language, these three people, she was thankful to see, lived a life in which emotion itself was indulgently deprecated. The whole scene, she thought, was rather like the birthday party of a hopelessly sick child in a hospital, where everybody takes care to be cheerful. Lisle ought to have called his attendant "Nursie." The atmosphere was that of people secure in themselves, who derived amusement from the funny little ways of less highly controlled humanity. There was an etiquette to be learned. She felt that her husband and the priest would presently exchange humorous glances over her head on account of her ignorance of their convention. She was the only person in the room who belonged to the present hour, and she felt that her hat was a violation of good taste. The costumes of the others, the uniform of the nurse, the cloth of the priest, escaped the frivolous limitations of momentary fashion. The sick man, the nurse, the priest, each of them had accepted the convention of a dedicated life that took no color from the changes of time. As if to give her a chance to look round, they were talking together now, with allusions, in a language which she barely

understood. She herself—she saw it clearly—was a probationer. She, too, must learn the rules of the dedicated life.

She was picking up the cues with furious rapidity, and storing them away in her brain. Already she began to see the kind of life it was—a fanatical worship of method for its own sake, an unquestioning reliance upon the occult inspiration of canonical hours. It was a passionate sifting-over of the prodigally wasted experiences of the past, a resolute ruling out of vain regrets, a microscopic exhaustion of the infinitely little—a carving of cherry-stones. All deliberate, and all cheerful. Cheerfulness, beyond everything, was the imperative condition. She remembered the strange and entrancing savor of common food after an illness in childhood; she must learn to appreciate life in a similar way.

She had time now to look round the room, and to see how admirably it was adapted to the conventions. She recognized familiar pieces of furniture—things that she had chosen herself. There was very little that was new in itself, but the total effect was altogether new. There had been a purging; the contents of the house in Grosvenor Road had been gone through with a single idea, and the result was a survival of objects that had a common relation to

austerity. To judge by this room alone, many beautiful things had been sacrificed; but it was quite obvious why they had been sacrificed, and accepting the convention, taste approved the sacrifice. There was, for example, no piano; and Margaret recognized, with hardly regret, that music was one of the things that she must do without in the future. The strikingly new object in the room was a large crucifix of ivory and ebony over the couch where her husband lay. There was in the air a remote spicy smell as if incense had lately been used. In the bookcase were a few familiar books, but the note was given by many volumes with the common character of padded covers and red silk markers.

Although the three talked among themselves without more than a casual reference to Margaret, it was evident that they talked for her benefit, so that she might learn her way about, as it were, and avoid blunders. Now and then she was called upon to listen to some incident of every-day life zealously magnified into an anecdote. Apparently Lisle had formed a circle of child friends, whom he met daily on the heath. Of old, he had never seemed to care much for children. Now he had experimented with children and found that he liked them, as he had found apparently that he liked animals. Margaret

remembered a passage out of one of the saddest books of the world, which Fawcett had lent her: "The presence of a pair of children, now from this family of the clan and now from that, has formed a leading gratification—I may say the chief gratification."

She was more and more thankful for the presence of the priest. Some force, the support of comprehension, seemed to come from him to her. She was convinced that he felt the dangerous nearness of the whole scene to a hysterical outburst; she understood the part he was playing—he wanted to keep them steady. He stood in the window bay, holding his advantage of the light, fingering his rosary, joining in the trivial conversation with a smile that was too kindly to be called indulgent, but his eyes were very anxious. She wondered if he had been stationed there when the cab stopped; whether he had seen Fawcett on the pavement, and she rather hoped that he had. The feeling that he was incredulous of her ability to play the part required of her, to accept the convention; the suspicion that it was from her he expected the danger of emotion to come, kept her faculties defiantly on the alert. There was already an understanding, half hostile, between them, of which Lisle was quite

unaware. Evidently he leaned upon the priest to a pathetic degree; he was at this moment even a little apologetic in his manner toward him, as if he hoped Father Fabian wouldn't be jealous of his wife. Margaret saw that if she stood well with Father Fabian, Lisle would never have a moment's anxiety about her. She therefore wanted, not to conciliate, but to reassure Father Fabian. She wished that he lived in the house; she hoped that she would get an opportunity to talk to him alone before the end of the evening.

Lisle was now talking about the house with the keen domestic concern of a woman.

"It's really very convenient," he said. "The dining-room is behind this. There are five bedrooms. I have the one overhead, and nurse is next door. For the present, we've been obliged to put you right away at the top—wouldn't you like to go and take your things off, by the way?—well, presently. Of course, the steps look rather formidable. Those dear fellows," indicating the priest and, she supposed, Doctor Baines, "harried the neighborhood, but they couldn't find a house on the level that was satisfactory in other ways. We moved, of course, between two quarter-days—Baines wanted it done at once. However, we are on the level at the back.

It's a kind of fortress, you see. Tiresome people have to scale the steps under a raking fire, and meanwhile there's an open line of retreat for me into the garden. There's a door at the bottom of the garden, you know, and my carriage comes round every afternoon at two. Mr. Barker—whom we command by the month—is groom, steed and coachman in one. Sometimes he pulls, and sometimes he pushes—according to the behavior of the war office, I believe—but he is always an ex-soldier with views. Barker on women gave us a subject for debate for a whole week. Indeed, it was never finished, though Nurse Kelly claims to have said the last word. You'll like the garden. We are great gardeners. We have committee meetings, Fabian, nurse and I—and sometimes Baines—and we quarrel quite noisily over the proper treatment of annuals."

"Wouldn't you like to see the garden now, Mrs. Lisle, before the light goes?" said Father Fabian suavely.

Margaret looked at him. The expression on his handsome arrogant face was commanding.

"Yes, I should like to see the garden," she said, suppressing the eagerness with which she accepted the challenge.

"Yes, do, by all means," said Lisle, not so successfully concealing his evident desire to bring them together in a tête-à-tête; "but don't let Fabian bully you into a tame acceptance of his pernicious views on thinning out."

The priest opened the door for her, and they went through the dining-room, where the maid was laying the table for supper, into a small high-walled garden, now in shadow, with narrow borders round the sides, graveled walks and a grass-plot with a rectangular bed in the middle. There was a door in one corner at the bottom, and in the other a small sycamore, its young leaves contrasting vividly with the sooty stem.

"The idea, you see," said Father Fabian, talking rapidly and loudly in a dry hard voice, "is to have, if possible, some little thing blossoming at every season of the year. A quite little thing, but something with character and individuality—something that can be talked about. How foolish people are in their wholesale gulping down of beauty without tasting it! We should rather try to extract the last essence of the insignificant."

He stepped across to the bed in the middle, and continued with the same dry earnestness:

"This year we have sown annuals—it was too

late to do anything else—but in the autumn we shall get a few herbaceous plants and a great many bulbs. Annuals are beautiful while they last, but they are here to-day and gone to-morrow, and they smother everything else. Nobody ever allows enough room for the growth of annuals. We shan't be so far behind with our sweet peas after all, and they weren't sown until quite late in April."

"They must have sticks put to them at once," said Margaret—"sticks," she repeated absently, "or wire."

He took no notice of her remark; evidently he did not expect or desire her to talk, and he went on:

"The back of the house faces due south, so that we get no sun on that border at the bottom. It ought to be turned into a rockery for ferns and—alpines, I think they call them. Of course, the last people left some plants in the borders. There, you see, are London-pride, rock cress, a few pinks and quite a number of sweet-williams. Have you ever noticed what an exquisite thing London-pride is?" He strode across to the border and plucked a spike of the tiny flowers. "See—the little crescent of crimson spots on each petal and the beautiful color of the anthers. There is a whole world of beauty in these little disregarded things. Then there are

those two odd blue flowers—I forget what they are called."

"Lupins," said Margaret.

"Ah, is that their name? Lupins, lupins. There's something in Lucian about lupins. However, you are fond of gardening?"

"I don't know much about it, but I like flowers."

"You must learn, you must learn," he repeated absently. "We knew nothing about gardening two months ago."

His intense gravity over this pocket-handkerchief of a place would have struck Margaret as extravagantly ridiculous, but that she knew he was talking to keep her mind moving, as a doctor would hurry a patient up and down who had taken an overdose of opium and was in danger of going into a fatal sleep.

"How beautiful it is after the storm!" he continued. "The scent of the earth—so different from any other fragrance. You can almost hear the roots of things drinking up moisture. Every tiny blade of grass gives out its separate note of thanksgiving."

"Yes, yes," she said absently. She felt herself getting giddy with the effort to keep from looking back.

"And the birds. We encourage them. Already they are getting tamer. Look at that cheeky fellow with a black cap! We intend to complete our conquest over them when the winter comes on. Half a cocoanut— Woman!" he cried passionately, and gripped her arm. "Don't think, don't think; don't look aside! You are strong enough—do you hear? Strong enough. You've *done* it, I tell you, and the rest is nothing."

"Don't shout at me, please," said Margaret quietly; "he'll hear you."

He released her arm at this with a deep breath of relief.

"Oh, you're completely beyond everything," he said, with a low chuckle, as if at some perfect work of art. "I'm satisfied."

"You were saying—" Margaret began.

"Never mind the garden now," he said, dismissing the subject with a contemptuous gesture. "Tell me about yourself—how you employ your time, I mean."

As if she were applying for a situation, Margaret told him about her leather work. They walked up and down the short gravel path, with bent heads, talking earnestly as if they had known each other for years. She was struck by his amazing quick-

ness in adapting himself to a subject that must have been quite new to him.

"But can I do it here?" she asked when she had finished her narrative.

"Admirably," he said. "And do you do needlework—embroidery—that sort of thing?"

"Well, I had thought about it," she said, smiling at his keen intuition.

"Oh, but you must. Don't you see?—copes, chasubles. I can get you orders. It will give a unity, a common interest. Oh, the plan is perfect!"

"I want your advice in a practical matter," Margaret went on. "There's a very dear friend of mine, a girl, a young woman who has—who has suffered. She lives in unhappy surroundings, and I want her to come here, do you see?"

"Yes; tell me more about her."

"She's a girl of the people, but very quiet and nice-mannered. She would come here nominally as my maid, but she would really be a companion. I couldn't treat her as a servant. She was one of my assistants I spoke of. I—I love her."

"Let us have it quite clear," he said gravely. "You say, a companion. But that doesn't mean a division—that you, pardon me, that you recoil?—that you want a sympathy, an affection, a relief—"

"Oh, no," said Margaret. "I shall go right in, and she will come in with me. In a year or so she would pass for what people call a 'lady.' She'll be part of the plan."

They walked a few steps in silence, and then he said:

"I see no objection. Or, rather, I believe the idea is a good one. You speak of it to him this evening, but not as if you had mentioned it to me. I'll back you up. But I believe he'll jump at the idea—for a reason which, let me warn you again, must not be present in your mind. He's painfully anxious to concede—ah, pity him!—to bribe. He's afraid you'll be dull. Room? Oh, yes, there's plenty of room here. You'll be able to do without Nurse Kelly in a few weeks—though, of course, you must talk to Doctor Baines about that. Let me impress upon you the importance of beginning now, at once, whatever you intend to do. You see that, don't you? There must be no second thoughts, no finding out ways to escape boredom. Now I think we'd better go in."

Before they reached the door he turned and said, with a sincerity that removed every shadow of offense from the words:

"I don't know what you've done, I don't care

what it cost you, but, believe me, it was worth doing. I thank God for letting me meet you."

Lisle called to them cheerfully, but with an emotional quaver in his voice:

"Come along, you people; the soup's getting cold. Fabian, you've been taking a base advantage to push your thrice-accursed view on thinning out."

THE END

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